



— Draw a circle, that's —

Hetvalia!

INTRODUCTION

On July 6, 2006, Hidekaz Himaruya posted the very first Hetalia comic strip to his blog. Now, 20 years later, Hetalia has spawned hundreds of strips, anime episodes, movies, stage plays, and a fanbase that even two decades from the series beginning is still going strong.

We hope you enjoy this celebration of Hetalia and it's fandom on it's 20th birthday.

The theme of the zine is **journeys**, to celebrate all the journeys this series has brought us through, and the journeys of the characters in it.

Draw A Circle, That's Hetalia! is a free digital fanzine featuring characters from Hidekaz Himaruya's Hetalia: World Stars series.

Hetalia: World Stars is the intellectual property of Hidekaz Himaruya and Shueisha Inc. This fanzine is not associated with Hidekaz Himaruya, Shueisha Inc., or the Hetalia franchise.

The work featured in this fanzine is transformative and nonprofit, placing this work under the definition of Fair Use as outlined by the United States Copyright Office.

The rights to the works contained within Draw a Circle belong to their respective owners. No part of this project may be redistributed without owner permission.

Cover Art by: **Lyrebird**

MOD TEAM

Lyrebird | Head Mod | Graphics Mod | Formatting Mod

t: Crooked-Sketches **t**: Lyresbird **t**: ask-hws-eire

Alessia | Art Mod

t: flamaflavio

HoshiDensha | Art Mod

t: hoshidensha **@**: hoshidensha **✉**: hoshidensha

Pretzel | Art Mod

t: xxshumai **📧**: xxshumai.carrd.co

Astro | Writing Mod

t: atrophilic-soul

Soup | Writing Mod

t: s0upycat

Stew | Discord Mod

AKnightOfAGoodKing | Organisation Mod

t: the-kings-of-games **✉**: flame_chiyo **✉**: the-kings-of-games

Table Of Contents

CHARACTER LOVE

All those journeys , Jackce.....	11
t : Jackce @ : Jackce_art	
LietTime , Satonemei.....	12
t : cawe-sama @ : satonemei	
Through Time , Ifindus.....	13
t : ifindus	
Watch Out! , Cheri.....	14
t : cherim0y	
The light of April thorough a broken vase , MaChi.....	16
t : ma-chi1993 ✉ :Sangue_di_drago	
Two Brothers Both Alike In Dignity , theheroinewashere	24
t : Theheroinewashere	
Bharat , Mona.....	25
✉ : birdshenanigans	
Beau In The Panagbenga March , Skitchune.....	26
t : Skitchune	
Adamastor , Galatea D’Negro.....	27
@ : Galateadnegro ✉ : GalateaNegro	
“It’s About The Journey” , Hetaari	28
t : hetaari ✉ : Hetaari	
Some Things Never Change , Paige.....	36
t : peiart @ : paigerwinart	
Movie Night , lindikuiper.story.art.....	37
@ : lindikuiper.story.art	
Beau In The Tall Grass , Skitchune	38
t : Skitchune	

Table Of Contents

Prussia Trip , Chermice.....	39
@ : Chermice__ ✉ : Chermice	
My World Up North , bonpocalypse.....	40
t : bonpocalypse	
Keep the change , Celadonite.....	50
✉ : celadonite ✉ : tsurugari	
A taste of Belgium , Nina.....	51
t : vkcenjoyer ✉ : vkc_enjoyer	
The Color of Life , phyripo.....	52
t : phyripo	
A New Journey , SpicyBee.....	62
@ : spaici_bee_	
Sakura Season , fiirekat.....	63
@ : FiireKat ✉ : FiireKat	
Collecting Little Happy Moments , temabutterfly.....	64
t : tema-makes-art-sometime	
Mere pa vej , KaruAmaku.....	65
t : aphicelend @ : karuamaku	
The Potluck , ScarlettLillies.....	66
t : scarlettlillies ✉ : ScarlettLillies	
Dozing Off Dolls , Dappernette	74
t :the-doll-house-gallery ✉ :Dappy_Dol	
One more Song , Jaynuu.....	75
t : jaynuu_ @ : jaynuu	
Anniversary Party! , Solareeluna.....	76
t : Solareeluna	

Table Of Contents

SHIPPING

Matching Closets , Paige.....	79
t : peiart @ : paigerwinart	
Time for a Ceilidh , HoshiDensha.....	80
t : hoshidensha @ : hoshidensha	
Just for the two of us , Corvussei.....	81
t : Corvussei @ : Corvussei	
We'll be fine , Maiva.....	82
t : maivalkov ✂ : maivalkov	
Victory smiles upon us , Aurum.....	90
t : aurum-cat @ : aurum.cat	
Between the Cliffs, Pour Toujours , oh_moomeo	92
t : tammie-brown ✂ : oh_moomeo	
Home Is You , crudfell.....	98
✂ : crudfell @ : crudfell	
Home is Here , crudfell.....	99
✂ : crudfell @ : crudfell	
Ritter, Tod und Rosen , Kamuwari.....	100
@ : kay_kamu	
Alma Ausente , Helia.....	102
t : helianskies ✂ : helianskies	
The World We've Seen , Callan.....	110
t : herriberriart @ : herriberriart	
A Timeline for the Longest Saturday in Ludwig's Life , Roshon Nyhne.....	112
t : Nyhne ✂ : Nyhne	
BFCake , Miaklare.....	120
♡ : miaklare @ : miaklareart	

Table Of Contents

Vien Á Moi / Come to Me , Jaynuu.....	122
t : jaynuu_ @ : jaynuu	
Celebrating the useless Italy comic , Lyrebird.....	123
t :crooked_sketches t :lyresbird	
Night at the County fair , Vinsmoke-Lover.....	124
t : vinsmoke-lover ✂ : Winter_Soldier_Love	
Portal Hopping! , temabutterfly.....	128
t : tema-makes-art-sometimes	
Memories and Bonds , Galatea D'Negro.....	129
@ : Galateadnegro ✂ : GalateaNegro	
In the Blink , ironbrutus.....	130
t : ironbrutus ✂ : ironbrutus	
Morning meeting , rzhkch.....	138
t : rzhkch	
His and Hers , Nina.....	140
t : vkcenjoyer ✂ : vkc_enjoyer	
Artists and their Muses , Lyrebird.....	141
t : crooked_sketches t :lyresbird	
Leading to Forever , Pru.....	142
t : Pru2You ✂ : helfenundwehren	
Dover , ellmovy.....	150
t : ellmovy @ : ellmovy	
Familliar Rubble , DoomSpiral.....	152
t :doomspiral ✂ : doomspiral	
Spotlight , hydra.....	158
✂ : hydraespacial ✂ : hydraespacial	
In a world where nothing can last , Spiltrosetea.....	160
✂ : spiltrosetea ✂ : callingthequits	

Table Of Contents

ORIGINAL CHARACTERS

Risk, Circe.....169
t: circlique **✈**: circlique

Mexico Weaving with her past self, lyssa-ohno.....170
t: lyssa-ohno **✈**: lyssa-ohno

City Lights, Circe.....172
t: circlique **✈**: circlique

Structured chaos, Smil3y.d0nut.....173
@: smil3y.d0nut

Amazonas, Dore.....174
t: doremile **✈**: doremile

Mexico, somecallmetim.....175
t: draw-the-earth

All’s fair in love and War (and hospitality), Tokkii.....176
t: itstokkii

Island nation beach party, Lyrebird.....182
t: Lyresbird **t**: crooked-sketches

Domestic slumber, Smil3y.d0nut.....183
@: smil3y.d0nut

Homoousian, peonycats.....184
t:peonycats **@**: peonycats

A day off in Manila, Chocolate.....186
t: tsoko-late

Airlines of USA, Ari.....188
@: Marchi.moon **✈**: Uscgpolarstar

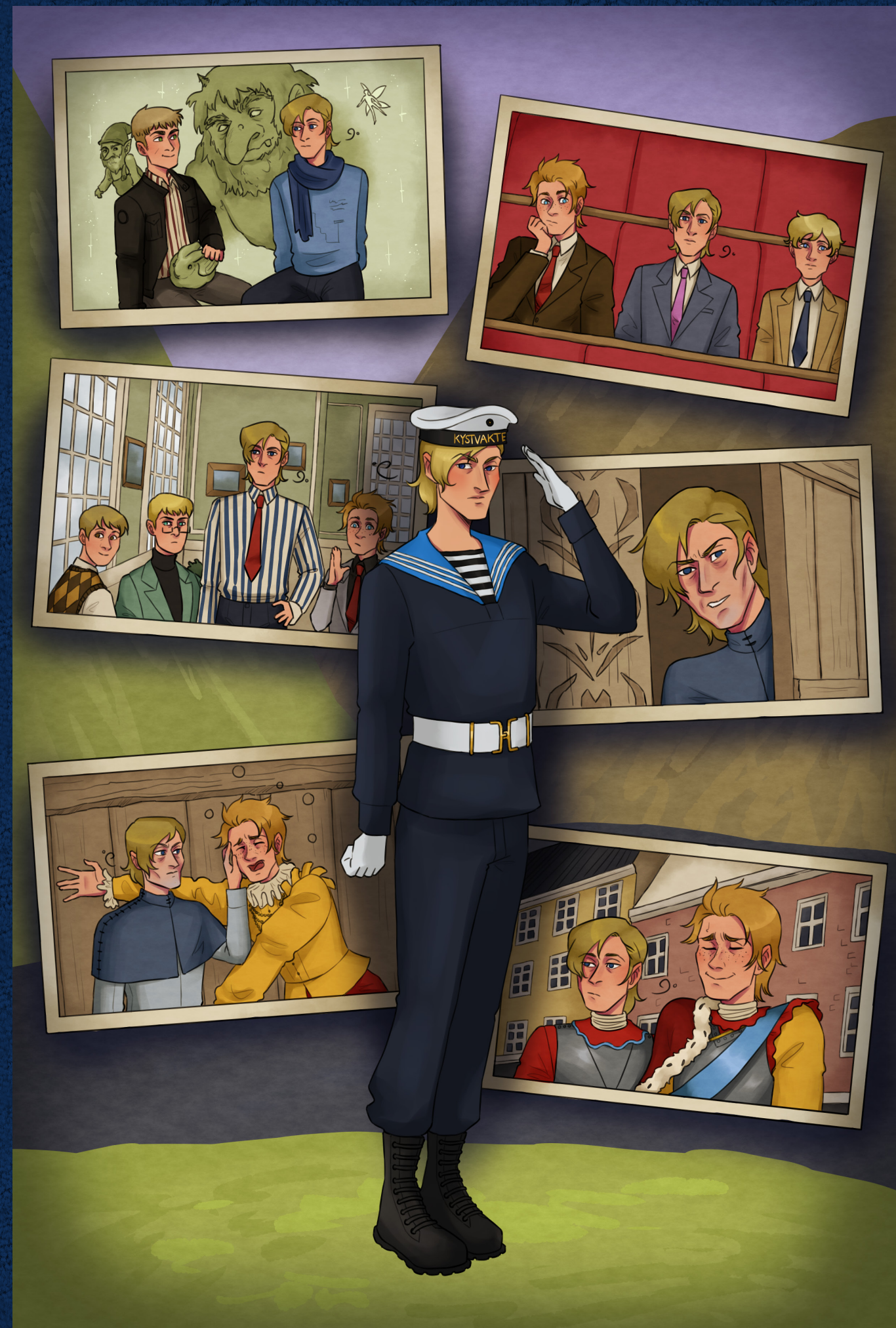
CHAPTER ONE

CHARACTER LOVE

To celebrate all the characters that made us fall in love with the wonderful world of Hetalia.
Between friendships, and siblinghood, to family and all the in-between's.

Our artists and writers explore the journey of these characters lives through the centuries, from ancient to modern times.







THE LIGHT OF APRIL THROUGH A BROKEN VASE

WRITTEN BY: MACHI

China sits by the window of his apartment, his fingers curled loosely around a porcelain cup. In front of him, Beijing pulses with the colorful neon of the lights of the buildings and with the noises from the traffic and from being populated by millions of people; above him, the evening sky bruises gold and fades into deep crimson, like old tea leaves.

Everything blurs into the same quiet hum, though. It happens when he thinks too much about time, when he feels all the weight of the millennia he has lived deep into his own bones.

He takes a slow sip and sighs.

The tea has gone cold. Again.

He places the cup on the railing and gets lost into the horizon. He should go to sleep: he has to accompany his boss in Europe tomorrow, he needs to rest to better deal with the flights and the jet lag and his boss and his assistants and the ambassadors and his peers. The deal they are going to sign is pretty important after all.

He's just not in the mood to care.

He's never in the mood to go to Rome, after all. Too many ifs and wondering about what could have been if history had gone in another way. Ancient Rome had been gone for almost two millennia, yet China can still hear that loud, golden sound that had been his voice, echoing in the halls of his palaces and home.

He had been too much of everything, that empire. Too bright, too loud; maybe too mortal for a nation. And China, so composed and old even then, had found that both irritating and almost comforting. Charming even, like one could find charming a young, blathering kid dreaming of big adventures.

Night falls on Beijing. China still doesn't move, lazily moving around the cold tea in the cup.

The flight from Beijing to Rome takes eleven hours. He doesn't sleep. He never sleeps well when Rome is waiting at the other end.

He reads instead, a book about the Han dynasty he has already read four times, watching the words blur in the dim cabin light. Outside the small oval window, the clouds are white and flat and indifferent, hiding everything below. Somewhere under that ceiling of white must be the Alps, then the Po Valley, then the city.

"Come see my Rome," Roman Empire had made him promise centuries ago, after visiting what at the time had been his capital, Luoyang. China kept that promise only a few decades ago, and he had not expected Italy to feel so familiar. At the time, he had come for trade talks, for papers and signatures and tight European smiles; but the moment he stepped onto Roman soil, something in the air had shifted. The sun struck the marble in a way he hadn't seen in centuries, and every young official who greeted him, every waiter pouring coffee, every laughing passerby in the street had carried a flicker of someone he had lost long ago. A tilt of the head, a confident stride, a golden warmth in the eyes - echoes of an empire that once spoke to him like a brother.

He closes the book.

Rome is younger and smaller than Beijing, yet manages to be just as chaotic and breathtaking, old and new blending together and creating a such a distinct landscape it's impossible to mistake it for another city.

It is the 21st of April. Rome would have been 2778 years if he was still alive.

He watches in silence the Urbe pass beyond the window - the umbrella pines, the aqueduct ruins standing in fields between apartment buildings, the sudden appearance of a column where there shouldn't be a column. His boss is reviewing documents beside him. An assistant is checking her phone. Neither of them knows what day it is, not really. Not the way he knows it.

The city is already celebrating. There are banners, people in costume, men in centurion armor waving to tourists near the Colosseum, children dragging their parents toward gelato shops. Someone has hung a laurel wreath over a traffic sign, and no one has taken it down.

The dinner is in a private room of the Quirinale. The table is long, the lighting warm. There are flowers China doesn't recognize arranged in tall vases, and a seating plan someone has labored over, and the buzzing energy of a room full of people who are important in suits pretending this is casual.

He is placed near the center. To his left, after two Italian officials and the German ambassador, sits France. Across from him, on the other side of a floral arrangement, Romano and Veneziano are already bickering in undertones, their boss obliviously chatting beside them.

Spain arrives late as usual, sliding into his chair with the unruffled confidence that is somehow not arrogant, and immediately apologizes to everyone within a radius of three seats. Portugal arrives at the same moment, quiet and unhurried, and sits beside Spain. Romania appears last, from a direction that doesn't quite correspond to any of the doors, and finds his place without explanation.

The bosses make small talk, the other European and Asian nations chat between themselves, the wine is poured.

China folds his hands in his lap and observes.

The first time they met, Rome had dust in his hair and gold in his eyes. They stood in the desert, a place between worlds, surrounded by traders shouting, camels braying, silk gleaming under a ruthless sun.

Rome had laughed as he reached out to China, his accent strange and his smile infectious: "So you're the one behind this magic cloth," he had said, running his fingers through the silk.
"Feels like the skin of a goddess."

China had raised an eyebrow: "You speak boldly for someone who doesn't even know how to hold chopsticks."

Rome had grinned wider: "Then teach me. I'll trade you wine for wisdom."

It had begun like that, somehow: a friendship that spanned empires.

They'd talk through interpreters and shared meals, each teaching the other how the world looked from his side.

Rome spoke of conquest and law, of roads that would last forever.

China spoke of harmony, of dynasties that rose like the moon and fell like the tide.

Rome laughed at fate; China respected it.

But they understood each other all the same.

He notices Veneziano first. He is talking to a Chinese official about something to do with cultural exchange, leaning forward with genuine eagerness, his eyes close as usual. He gestures as he speaks, broad and theatrical like only him can be, hands tracing shapes in the air as if the words alone aren't quite enough to contain what he means. His face, when he is animated like this, carries a glow that has nothing to do with the candlelight.

China has known him way before the unification with his older brother, when he walked his grandfather's footsteps to reach him and trade with him. He has always been fond of him, in the vague, careful way one is fond of things that cause a complicated kind of pain: Veneziano has Rome's warmth; not his ambition, or the bright ruthless heat of him at his peak, but the warmth. Rome'd walk into a room full of senators who hated him and within an hour they'd all be laughing at his stories. He had an ease with people, an ease with joy, that China had found inexplicable and, privately, a little enviable.

Veneziano laughs at something the official says, light and unguarded. China has to look down at his wine glass for a moment.

France catches him watching and raises his glass across the table.

"You look pensive, mon cher," he says, clearly performing ignorance.

"I am always pensive, one has to between youngsters like you all."

"Oui, but tonight more so than usual," France tilts his head. The candlelight catches the angle of his elegant cheekbone, and for a moment - just a moment... There's something older beneath the tailoring and the refinement, a pride that is less cultivated and more bone-deep.
The pride of something that was once genuinely great and has never quite recovered from the knowledge of its own greatness.

Rome had been proud too, but his pride had been louder, bright like the sun.

France had learned to wear it differently, more beautifully, perhaps. He remembers a day, a few years ago, when a drunk France had confessed him, between a glass of wine and a sob, how much he resented the fact that he could hear Rome in his own voice sometimes, that he remembers so little of Gallia but so much of the man that conquered his land, to whom he owed his existence and yet resembled so little.

"It's his birthday," China says. France will know what he means. His expression doesn't change much, but his eyes do. He looks down at his glass.

"I know," he murmurs, "I always know."

Across the table, Romano is arguing with Veneziano about something involving tomatoes, which is both extremely typical and, he suspects, not really about tomatoes at all.

"You can't just put them in like that," Romano is saying, in that voice he uses that sounds like anger and means something considerably more tender, "You have to- no, Veneziano, listen to me, you have to let them- would you stop nodding and actually listen!"

"I'm listening, I'm listening-"

"You have the same face you have when you're not listening."

"This is just my face-"

"It's your not-listening face-"

Their boss intercedes, placidly, and the argument subsides into mutual grumbling. Veneziano pats Romano's arm. Romano removes the arm and looks in the other direction and then, two seconds later, pats Veneziano back.

China watches all of this with mild amusement. Then Romano reaches for his wine glass, and tip it back, and the candlelight falls across his face at exactly the angle-

China's breath stops.

It is not a subtle thing, the resemblance. He doesn't know why it always surprises him, except that the mind protects itself where it can, and this is one of the places where his does not quite succeed. The structure of Romano's face - the nose, the jaw, the angle of the brow - is old in way certain things carry their origins so completely that one cannot look at them without seeing backwards.

He had seen it in marble first, in the Forum, centuries after Rome was gone, and had stood there longer than was dignified. He had walked away before anyone could ask him why he was standing still.

Romano sets down his glass and turns, with that particular sixth sense of the perpetually irritable, and finds China looking at him.

"What?" he says. Not rudely, just directly.

He doesn't answer immediately.

"Nothing," he says, at last, "You simply remind me of someone."

Romano frowns - and the frown, too, is Rome's, something between displeasure and the desire to argue: "Who?"

"Someone I knew a long time ago."

"Did you like them?"

The question is so blunt and so honest that China almost smiles.

"Yes. Very much."

Romano considers this for a moment, as if deciding whether to pursue it. Then he makes the face that means he has decided not to - which is a face China also recognizes - and turns back to his plate.

He is not untroubled, China has known Romano long enough to know the turbulence underneath, the old wounds, the complicated grief of someone who was raised in a shadow he loved and has never quite stopped mourning even while pretending he has. But at this moment, eating bread at a state dinner with his brother beside him...

Spain, two seats down from Romano, is telling a story about something that happened in Valencia that no one can quite follow but everyone is laughing at anyway, including Spain himself, which is part of what makes it work. He is easy, Spain, in the way that people from warm climates are easy. China has never entirely trusted people who are that comfortable in their own skin, and yet he has never been able to hold it against the Iberian nation.

Rome's joy had been expansive, imperial, the joy of a nation who believed everything was worth celebrating because everything was his. Spain's is quieter than that, more earned. He has lost a great deal, Spain, and he laughs anyway, and the laughter is not denial but something more complicated: a choice, made daily, to love the world even knowing what it can do.

Rome, too, had loved the world. That was always the thing that had made him impossible to stay angry with for long.

Portugal, beside Spain, is refilling someone's water glass without being asked. He catches China's eye and nods. He says little at these gatherings, he watches more than he speaks, and again there is something that China recognizes. Rome had not been a watcher, but there had been something in him, late in his life, a quieting toward the end, a learning to look at things rather than only conquer them.

He sometimes wonders if Portugal carries that part of him. The version that had begun, just barely, to understand.

Romania, at the far end of the table, is making the Chinese ambassador laugh at something that has probably made everyone else at his end of the table deeply uncomfortable.

His smile is sharp, delighted, slightly feral, that way of existing and refusing to be subdued by decorum or time or the accumulated weight of a difficult history. Rome had had that until the very end. Even at the end.

Romania catches him watching and raises an eyebrow. China looks away.

The food comes in courses, the wine is replenished, the bosses talk about things that are either very important or not important at all and it is not always easy to tell which. China speaks when spoken to, smiles when appropriate, offers the measured pleasantness of a very old nation that has learned to be present without being entirely there.

He keeps watching.

At one point, Romano leans across Veneziano to argue with France about something culinary, and France responds with the condescension he reserves for topics he considers himself to have originated, and Romano responds to the condescension with exactly the volume and vocabulary it deserves, and the table turns to watch them with the mixture of alarm and entertainment such exchanges always produce.

In the middle of it, Romano makes a gesture, broad and emphatic, and China is returned, without warning and without mercy, to a courtyard in the Levant, sometime in the second century, Rome arguing with Persia about the correct price for lapis lazuli, gesturing exactly like that, the same motion, the same certainty, the same refusal to be misunderstood.

He had laughed, that day. He had told Rome he was impossible.

Rome had agreed, cheerfully, and bought the lapis lazuli at Persia's price and then given it to China, still warm from the sun, with the casual generosity of someone for whom that was simply what one did.

"You always look at blue things the longest."

The stone had been lost centuries ago.

He blinks. His eyes are stinging.

He takes a slow sip of water and blinks again.

No one is looking at him.

Romano has sat back down, victory established, France pursuing it from a different angle now with escalating investment. Veneziano is mediating with enormous sincerity and almost no effect. Spain is watching with quiet pleasure. Portugal has his eyes on the middle distance, half-listening, the way sailors look at horizons. Romania says something from the far end and everyone laughs, even France, even Romano, who bites it off immediately and looks away as if he hasn't.

This is what remains, what two thousand years leaves behind: six people at a table, arguing about tomatoes and cooking times and whose culture invented what, carrying in the shapes of their faces and the patterns of their laughter and the ways they love and fight and refuse to give ground - without knowing that the loudest, most impossible, most infuriating empire in the history of the ancient world is still here, scattered across them like light through a broken vase, reassembled into something that is not him and never will be and is still, unmistakably, his.

"You'll miss me when I'm gone, frater."

Rome had called him frater, had toasted and made him toast to "civilizations of the world" over amphorae of wine China had thought far too sweet. He had boasted about architecture and legions, gestured wildly while quoting philosophers that had little in common with the ones coming from his house. China, at the time, had rolled his eyes and called him a fool. Rome had just laughed.

He had been right.

Damn him.

The dinner ends. Chairs are pushed back, coats are retrieved, bosses shake hands. Veneziano hugs three separate people. Romano shakes two hands and submits to a third hug with the expression of someone enduring a mild medical procedure. Spain and Portugal leave together, deep in a conversation that started at the table and will probably end sometime next week. France kisses cheeks with professional efficiency. Romania disappears in the direction he came from.

The room empties and outside Rome is still celebrating. There are lights along the Tiber. Someone, somewhere not far away, is playing music that is too faint to identify but has the tempo of something joyful. Every year, without fail. Without needing to be asked.

He remembers the last time Rome has visited him, emaciated and smaller than usual, meeker.

I thought I'd last forever, he had drunkly said.

China takes his phone from his pocket. Checks the date. The 21st has become the 22nd, somewhere in the last hour, while he wasn't watching.

Péngyǒu, shēng rì kuàilè.

He puts the phone away.





"IT'S ABOUT THE JOURNEY"

WRITTEN BY: HETAARI

Once an aspiring young adventurer hits 17, they must go on a journey to either slay a beast, or retrieve an item. Of course, the one who goes on this journey is accompanied by a more experienced adventurer, with the purpose of aiding the younger one when needed. A lot of people chose the beast option, often because they probably thought it'd make them look cooler.

Not Emil, though, he was built differently; his ego wasn't quite so large and he personally thought it wasn't worth the trouble to risk getting mauled to death by something way bigger than he is, regardless of whether someone was there to help him or not. All he had to do was go somewhere and get something, very straightforward. While he was given the object's location, he wasn't told what the object in question actually was. Annoying, but way easier than getting killed and eaten by an animal. He had this in the bag.

Sort of.

It was supposed to be kind of easy, it really was, but things went a bit pear-shaped when Emil was told he was to be accompanied by not one, not two, not even three, but four people. Four people he knew, actually. And not just any people he knew, it was those guys: Loud Magnus, overly cheery Tino, quiet Berwald (who was admittedly the most tolerable of the lot), and — probably the most annoying of them — deadpan but patronizing Lukas. It wasn't that he hated them, not at all, but they tended to be loose cannons, especially Magnus. Emil knew they meant well, but they just... did too much, and they really didn't sound like the ideal group of people to be stuck in the wilderness with.

4 A.M. the morning of the journey hit, and Emil had hardly slept at that point. He was nervous, scared, nearly to the point of feeling physically ill. This was the biggest rite of passage for someone his age, he had to do it right and come back in one piece.

He wanted to give his chaperones the benefit of the doubt, he really did want to for the sake of his sanity, but his mind kept wandering over to the idea of them affecting his success rate in any way, given how all over the place they seemed to be. When he met them hours later, their high spirits did nothing to quell his nerves.

Magnus patted Emil's back a little too roughly, acting way too energized as usual. "Hey, hey, little Emil! This is going to be so much fun, huh?"

"...What are you doing here?" He found himself asking, even though he knew exactly why they were here.

"Duh, we gotta go with you to get the thing. What are you even getting, anyway?"

Emil took a deep breath, a feeble attempt to keep himself composed. Nothing has happened yet and already, he was getting irritated. "... Yeah, I'd rather just do this by myself."

"And risk something bad happening to you? No can do!"

"And we're legally required to go with you," Tino added, "so we kind of don't have a choice here, either."

"It's whatever, just...don't get in my way."

Magnus leaned on Emil a little too much. "But we gotta make sure you don't die!"

"Obviously, I get that! Just don't get in my way if I'm not having trouble!"

"It's not like you're guaranteed to kill anything or get killed by anything. You're just getting something, after all."

"I know that, but still, don't bother me."

Lukas approached with quick strides and tilted Emil's head up by the chin, staring straight into his eyes. "Y'know, I don't think I like your attitude."

Emil swatted Lukas's hand away, still maintaining eye contact. "Good for you, it's not there for you to like, anyway."

"Real bold of you to be so rude to the one of the guys who's practically got your life in his hands."

"...Is that a threat?"

"No way, I'd never let anything bad happen to you. But you gotta calm down and watch yourself. Being mean and not cooperating is just gonna make this harder for everyone."

Unfortunately, Lukas was right. Emil wasn't being rude for the sake of it, but he was taking out his frustration and nerves on the nearest people, though not on purpose. He took a deep breath; he had to calm down. "Fine."

Lukas patted Emil's head (in a way that was definitely not condescending at all), a tinge of triumph in his otherwise flat voice. "Good boy."

"Let's just get this over with."

The beginning of their trek was tedious and uninteresting, a simple hike through the wilderness. Even though they were just walking, Emil was really beginning to feel the experience gap between himself and the others, as he found himself getting exhausted while the other four were unfazed by all the walking. He said nothing of it, as this was supposed to be a chance to prove that he could handle things like this; even when Tino repeatedly asked him if he wanted to stop, he declined, he didn't want to seem like some kind of weak child who couldn't even handle a bit of walking. It was already bad enough that they insisted they take turns holding his hand; even when they walked upon a path that went right by a waterfall, they still felt one of them should have a hand on him.

"This is insane, ain't it," Magnus shouted over the loud water. "One wrong move and we all die! Don't look down, by the way!"

Fear welled up within Emil's core, making it hard to focus. "Magnus, shut the hell up, I can't see!"

"You can't see? Your eyes are open, though!"

Magnus's ridiculous behavior didn't quell the fear running through his veins. Luckily, Berwald came to his aid. "The boy's tellin' you to shut up, Mag, so zip it."

"Okay, damn, my bad."

Finally, blissful silence. Aside from the crashing of the water, of course. The ground beneath them had become incredibly narrow, and it being a stone path right next to running water meant that it was quite slippery; one wrong step could send someone falling into the water below.

And it seemed like that wet stone ground didn't like Emil very much.

It was as if someone had replaced all his blood with ice water; the only thing separating him from the water below was Berwald, who was holding his hand, having been fast enough to pull him up. And all this right before they'd fully cleared the path. Excellent timing.

"Emil," Tino cried once they were on solid ground, "Are you okay?! You're not hurt, are you?!"

"I'm fine, don't worry about it."

"I will worry! What if no one caught you in time? You could've been seriously hurt or worse!"

"Don't fuss over me! I'm fine!"

Magnus put a hand on Emil's shoulder. "Not too hard on him, buddy, can't blame us for worrying. You're like our baby." When he noticed Emil scowling at him, he shuddered.

Berwald shook his head. "Th' last part wasn't necessary." He turned to look at Emil, his usually stern gaze more gentle. "We really were 'fraid, not just 'cause we're required to pr'tect you, but also 'cause we care."

Because they care, huh?

It wasn't that Emil didn't think they cared, it was more like they cared too much, they cared way more than he thought was necessary. Although he thought this, Tino's fussing and Berwald's gentle honesty filled him with guilt, which lingered far longer than he wanted it to. After a brief break, the next few hours brought them to a long bridge, its metal railings glimmering in the waning sunlight. Magnus, about to cross it, found himself suddenly being yanked backwards by his collar. "Are you nuts? Don't just cross it," Emil snapped, still holding Magnus's collar.

"Why not? It's right there, let's go!"

"No, no, this is too convenient. There has to be some kind of catch."

And then the catch in question hopped out from under the bridge, a soaking wet little man in scuba gear, having evidently been lurking around in the water. "Not so fast," he cried, his comically high-pitched voice cracking. "You may not cross this bridge!" Emil rolled his eyes. "Yeah, we figured."

"Don't be rude, boy! I'm serious! You can't cross my bridge until you answer my riddle!"

"Fine, what is it?"

The little man hopped into the water and then hopped right back out, holding a disproportionately large (and also soaking wet) book, flipping through the pages before asking, his voice strong and loud as if delivering a proclamation, "What is something that breaks but doesn't fall, and falls but doesn't break?"

"Day and night," Lukas answered blankly; the others looked at him in surprise, as it had barely been a full second since the question was asked.

"W-what?"

"Day breaks, night falls. It's day and night."

The surprised silence lingered momentarily before the little man, red in the face, yelled, "How dare you! Don't make fun of me!"

"Make fun of you? I answered your stupid question, now let us cross the bridge."

"You answered too quickly!"

Lukas crossed his arms. "Not my fault the answer was obvious."

"You disrespectful bastard! For that, you will get another riddle!"

"No, we won't," Berwald muttered, lifting the little man and throwing him back into the water. "We're burnin' daylight 'ere."

As the group crossed the unexpectedly long bridge, the daylight died further, leaving them cloaked in darkness by the time they reached the other side, where they ultimately decided to stop for the night.

The fire was crackling loudly, too loudly, nearly completely drowning out the chirping crickets and the sound of the trees and bushes swaying in the spring night breeze. The fire's light was warm and comforting, a bright oasis in the offputtingly dark wilderness; and so Emil stared into that light, ignoring whoever or whatever he felt was watching him until he could no longer tolerate it.

Lukas was wordlessly staring at him from the entrance of his tent.

Emil was tempted to ask what his deal was, but he ultimately bit his tongue, knowing that whatever he was going to say probably wasn't going to sound very nice. Lukas approached him, walking around the fire to sit next to him. "Feelin' okay, Em?"

"I'm fine, go back to sleep."

"You should be sleepin' too, ya know. Need that energy for tomorrow."

"I know, now go back to sleep."

"Stressed out?"

"...No."

"You are. I can see it on your face." He let the relative silence between them hang for a moment before continuing. "You'll be fine, you're gonna do fine."

"I know that." Emil did not, in fact, know that. He didn't even think that. "Just making sure." Lukas disappeared into his tent, and Emil was alone once more. His well-intentioned fellow travelers were kind of stressing him out. And he didn't even know what he was getting...what if he didn't find it? What if he found something and brought it back, only to be told it was the wrong item? In that case, would he have to go find it again, or would that be it, he'd just be labelled a failure for being unable to complete this task correctly? Just the very idea of that managed to further sour his mood.

Emil woke with a jolt. He glanced around, realizing he was now in his tent, which he didn't remember going into; he didn't even remember falling asleep, either. "Great," he thought, figuring that somebody probably carried him into his tent. Normally, he'd let them have it for that, but he knew it was on him for falling asleep outside, so he let it go, silently disassembling his tent.

"Looks like a few more hours of walking," Tino said, studying the map. "No other obstacles. We got lucky, this is the least treacherous journey I've ever been on!"

Looking from over Tino's shoulder, Lukas pointed at a spot on the map. "Look, part of our route merges into a marked hiking trail."

"Oh, it does! This'll be a piece of cake! You hear that, Emil? You're so close!"

"Super," Emil responded blankly.

Tino really wasn't lying when he said that they were so close. The final leg of their journey was relatively short and completely uneventful, no creatures or waterfalls or annoying little men in sight. The mid-spring weather was mild and pleasant: partly sunny, slightly on the cooler side, with a light breeze every now and then.

No one spoke, not even loquacious Magnus, not wanting to break the peaceful silence, which remained intact until they ended up in a cave. "Wait, what are we looking for again," Magnus shouted, his loud voice reverberating throughout the cave.

"It could be anything," Tino responded, searching amongst the rocks. "And please don't shout so loudly, you might attract something!"

"Anything," Emil said, sounding a little unsure.

"Anything!"

"Including the glowing box on the pedestal over there?"

The other four looked in the direction Emil was pointing, and indeed, there was an ornate red and gold box in the middle of the area, bathed in light coming from a hole above it.

"Oh, you found it!"

Emil was pleased to find that the box was already unlocked. Heart pounding, he opened the box, and found absolutely nothing.

It was completely empty.

"Are you joking?"

From beneath the box, a piece of paper floated to the ground; he picked it up and read the words upon it aloud: "It's not about the destination, it's about the journey."

He was not happy. All that just for an empty box and a lousy piece of paper? Nothing really happened to warrant learning some kind of life lesson (except maybe Emil being mad at the beginning), so he didn't have to go on a journey for this. He could've easily just watched a children's cartoon to learn that, but no, he had to learn that in the most unnecessarily long winded way imaginable.

Tino eyed the box in disappointment. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"Now what?"

"I guess we go back..."

"Did they ever say the thing in question had to be tangible?"

Emil thought for a moment. "Well, no, but they did say to get something, so it's safe to assume it would be something you can actually hold in your hands, right?"

"That makes sense..."

"I'll just...bring the box and the note, just in case." Emil put the note in the box and the box in his bag.

The group left the cave, each in varying degrees of disappointment. As they walked, Lukas grabbed Emil's hand. "This sure was a let-down, huh?"

"...Yeah."

"Hmm. Could've been worse, we could've found nothing."

"We literally did find nothing but an empty box and a piece of paper."

"But that's something. A fancy box and some paper is something."

"I guess." Emil looked at the ground. "What if neither the box nor the note is what I was supposed to find?"

"Then maybe it's the lesson supposedly learned."

"...What if it's not that either?"

"Then we go look again. You're only 17, you've got plenty of time." Lukas gave Emil's hand a firm squeeze. "And me and the others, we'll be right behind you, yeah?"

"Yeah."

And so they set off, caressed by the spring afternoon breeze. Emil started this journey irritated, and ended it disappointed. All this for a "lesson" that he didn't even feel like he learned. But maybe he expected too much, maybe he was expecting it to feel like enlightenment, like an epiphany, not like disappointment and annoyance. He could only hope for the best and pray that the box or the note or this so-called lesson was the correct thing to retrieve so he wouldn't have to do this again. But if they weren't...it couldn't be helped, he'll just do it again. He wouldn't mind it if it was these four to accompany him. He hoped it would be, actually. (Don't tell anyone about that last part, though.) Even though nothing was found and they were all a bit bummed, all was well. And then Emil remembered something.

"Wait, we have to cross the bridge to go back, right? What if we see that guy again?"

"Don't worry 'bout it. I'll toss 'im in the water again."





MY WORLD UP NORTH

WRITTEN BY: BONPOCALYPSE

The child arrived in the aftermath of a snowstorm, just outside of a small village with nothing but the

clothes on his back. He was not cold. He never fussed. He stared quietly at the villagers with deep violet

eyes. They found him sitting near a lake, where the boy claimed to be talking to fantastic creatures.

The town was confused. His origins remained a secret, as did his name. What is your name, child? Would be met with a silent, chilling stare. A couple that claimed him brushed this off as shyness. No response, no name. A child from the woods.

They named the child 'Rúni', for he was a secret known only to the gods.

He didn't mean it. By the gods, he did not mean it. But when half of the farm freezes in the dead of summer and the source is standing in the middle of the icy mess, humans react badly.

He did not remember the events leading up to the freeze. He was upset. There was another child antagonizing him. Was he yelling, or agitating Rúni by being in his presence?

It didn't matter, because the child, as well as the swine, chickens and cows stood unmoving.

Rúni, what have you done? A muffled voice— his father...? Screamed. His mother stood beside him, desperately trying to get him to respond. He... He did this. He did this?

The boy spoke quietly, to no one in particular. It wasn't... "It wasn't supposed to be this strong."

What did you do?! The voice cried out again.

It was strong, it was inhuman. None of the Seiðr could perform such magic— why could he? Gods, Rúni

feel dizzy. Everything told him to run. Bøyg told him to run. Far, far away from the village.

And so, Rúni fled.

The land was vast, almost infinite to the boy's mind. He would wander without direction, following Bøyg and Troll around. This continued on for years, centuries, with Rúni barely aging a day. He spent his days listening to his friends argue and bicker about matters in a world he can barely cross into.

He felt her arrival at sunset. He turned around, a woman approaching quietly. Something was... different about her. She had a warm smile on her face as she reached out to him.

"Why are you all alone, child?" She asked Rúni.

She kept her hand outstretched, beckoning for Rúni to hold it. "You're lost."

A soft laugh. She motioned to her hand again. "You're like me, I can feel it."

"I doubt you are," Rúni frowned, looking at the hand.

Bøyg motioned for Rúni to take her hand, even lifting it towards the woman when he refused. The woman simply laughed at the sight. So she can see Bøyg...

"You were not meant to be amongst humans. Not quite yet." He tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

The woman avoided the question. "Why don't you come with me? I will explain when we get to the cabin."

Take the hand, Norðvegr.

She waited patiently for him to accept her offer. He took another glance towards his friends, who motioned for him to accept. Are you certain?

Take her hand, Norðvegr.

With a deep breath, he took her hand.

The woman did not say a singular word to Rúni on the walk there. No mention of what to expect or what to do when they arrived. All he knew was that Bøyg trusted her, and that was a good sign.

Two boys, slightly older than Rúni, came up. They chatted about their day, arguing about who won their current fight. The one with ridiculous hair claimed he was the winner, the quieter one said the opposite. The woman chuckled, ruffling the boys' hair before pushing Rúni in front of her.

"I'm Steinn!" Ridiculous-Hair-who's-actually-named-Steinn shook Rúni's hand. Rúni frowned.

"And that guy over there," Steinn pointed to the other boy, "Is Björn." The boy waved when introduced.

The woman introduced herself to Rúni as Skaði, simply smiled, leading the boys into the cabin.

Skaði called the boys into the cabin, seating them around the table. Steinn sat closest to her, Björn took his place across from him. Rúni elected to sit across from Skaði, curious as to why she asked for their presence.

"What's going on?" Steinn tilted his head, leaning over the table. Unfurling a map on the table, Skaði circled different places— three spots in particular. "I wanted to show you three something."

Skaði pointed to the circles, first starting with the southernmost point.

"This, is the land of the Danes—"

"Where I'm from!" Interrupted Steinn. Skaði nodded.

"Where you represent."

Skaði smiled, looking around at the boys, "Do you three remember what I told you, when we first crossed paths?" Steinn fell silent, thinking hard. Rúni did similarly.

Björn spoke up, "You are like me." Words she said to Rúni, to everyone else like them.

She dragged her finger back to Steinn's circle, "This is Danmörk. Land of the Danes, your true name."

Before Steinn could ask any questions, Skaði turned her attention to Björn, pointing at the circle furthest right. "This is Svea, where I found you." Björn nodded.

"I like my true name more!" Steinn commented, Rúni elbowed him. He was too loud.

"Now, let me get to our northern circle." Skaði pointed at the northernmost circle. "The north. Our dearest Rúni," She paused.

"Norðvegr," He added calmly. Norðvegr. The Northern Way. What Bøyg called him since the start of his existence. Skaði smiled. "Precisely."

"Bøyg told me."

"Of course. Bøyg is quite wise."

Skaði revealed who she was; Skáney, their region, a person who wandered through the lands looking for nations like her. *You three now know who you truly are, and what you must do.*

Skáney appointed the child a true name- he was called The Northern Way.

The humans found him just as Skáney did, as the humans from the village did. Alone, talking to the other world.

He first introduced himself as Norðvegr, which they laughed at. Why would they laugh at his name? He backtracked, reintroducing himself as Rúni. The men were seafarers. *Vikings*, they called themselves, and they were to take a journey outside of Norðvegr. Rúni's interest piqued, he had never been outside of his nation, and according to these men he was of perfect age to travel along.

"Might I join you?"

The men roared in laughter. They claimed he was far too weak, unprepared. Rúni huffed when hearing their rejection, complaining to Bøyg and Troll about the event.

"They said I was weak," He threw a stone across the lake, frowning.

"I'm not weak. I won in a fight against Steinn more than he can count!"

Troll roared in amusement, "That Dane never takes the loss well. Norðvegr. You wish to go?"

"Of course." He glanced out to the water. Rúni imagined the open sea, the wind breezing around him. Wild, free, feeling as though he were on a quest. How could it not be appealing? "Then you should go."

"They will not let me on the ship."

Troll spoke up, "You are a clever boy. You will find a way on."

There was not a soul on the island they found. The land was windy, far more than Norðvegr. It had a bite that sunk into your skin and yet, Rúni felt called to this place. Within months, Rúni made friends with the local hidden folk. They would pull him along, showing him beautiful sights the Norsemen did not see. Every time they would show him, Rúni would smile, and thank them.

One day, his new friends took him to a nearby cave. We want to show you someone! At first, Rúni scoffed. The only people on the island were ones that he met on the mainland. Who could possibly be in this cave?

The hidden folk shushed him, claiming 'he' would be overwhelmed. Rúni bit his tongue back to ask who he was. The one closest to him pushed him into the cave, *Norðvegr, go meet him.*

Whatever was in this cave was not human. Rúni was not scared. Wherever he was, he was meant to be there.

"Hello?" He called out, his voice echoing back at him. Rúni winced, the cave made his voice loud. "Show yourself." Echoes of footsteps rang about. Rúni waited for the steps to stop. He listened closely, footsteps stopping in front of him.

'His' eyes reflected off the sunlight from the mouth of the cave. The boy was dressed plain, he would have looked like a ghost if it weren't for the large bird on his head.

The boy reached out, tilting his head in curiosity over Rúni's appearance. The bird stayed silent, flying off to his side in deep annoyance. Rúni didn't like the bird.

"You're the one they wanted me to meet." Rúni whispered. The child nodded. He stepped closer. The child pointed to him, as to say likewise. How strange that Rúni could understand someone he met so quickly.

"You were born on this island?" Another nod. The kid was quiet, as was Rúni.

The child was like him. Alone, with friends from another world. He was like Rúni, because of that, he couldn't help but feel the need to take him in.

The child pointed again, first to Rúni, then to himself. He said one word, "Bróðir..." Small, whispered.

This was different from his sworn family. This was blood, a little brother. There was no denying it. The child, whose dull eyes shone whenever Rúni was around, was named Sindri. And for the century Rúni stayed on the island, one his men called Island, he would never leave his side.

Copenhagen was a bustling town, much to the brothers' awe. Sindri sat quietly next to Rúni on the trip through the city; of course if they were to be in a union, it had to be under Denmark's territory.

Rúni looked at the boy, giving a small nod. "It will be like when we stayed in the cave, remember? Except with more people." He refused to let Sindri worry.

Sindri curled in on himself, squeezing his poor puffin. "I don't want to go. Bad."

"We won't make it bad. I'll be with you always, I promise."

"Double promise."

"I double promise."

The brothers were greeted by the Queen herself right next to Denmark. The latter was suspiciously calm, a goofy smile still spread on his face.

"Welcome to Copenhagen, Norway and Iceland."

Rúni recognized everyone except for a peculiar kid around Rúni's age who went by the name of Onni, or Finland. He was reserved, shut off from the rest of the boys, not wanting to be there. Rúni understood how he felt, and giving a polite nod he returned to tuning out Denmark's long speech.

The union began to benefit his nation less and oriented around Denmark and Sweden's more. Everything must revolve around Denmark, and if not him, Sweden. Rúni, along with Sindri and Onni, were afterthoughts of two powers.

Rúni would be invited to listen in on their meetings, taking notes and providing insights into what needed help around his nation. As time went on, he was invited to fewer meetings ("I was so busy I forgot to invite you!") until it was a given that he would sit out and stay with Onni and Sindri ("This meeting is between me and Sweden, alright? Go play with the territories."). Rúni would sit outside of those meetings, listening to the two argue to great volumes. Never had he seen the two so against each other in anything. It was about power, of course it was.

This was Denmark's way of proving superiority over Sweden, and vice versa, and they've dragged along the rest of the nations with them.

Frustrated, Rúni snapped. "If you don't want to see each other that much, why are we even a union anymore?"

Denmark stormed out of the room. Sweden followed suit.

He came back with his bags, dragging Onni out the door.

Denmark watched them leave in the snowy night before turning to the brothers.

"You're going to leave too?"

Rúni narrowed his eyes, "Will you give me a reason to?"

No response. Denmark turned to leave through the hallway, slamming the door to his quarters as loud as possible.

Denmark was a suffocating force, and Rúni could barely keep up. Despite that, he stayed. Maybe because loyalty for his friend, or because Sindri- who Denmark pressured to change his name to Emil, was still there.

Denmark was a suffocating force, and Rúni could barely keep up. It was clear how much influence the two had in the union, which was nothing. Not a single part of the union felt distinctly Norwegian. The capital had to be Copenhagen. The official language had to be Danish, enforced even in Rúni's nation. Rúni could barely even recognize his beloved Norse! His culture, his beloved Norway was slowly morphing into that of the Danes, and it made Rúni despise Kristiarn more each day.

Rúni even succumbed to changing his name after millenia of pressure from Denmark ("Your name is far too old, the citizens can't even pronounce it the way it used to be!"). If the world was changing, if his kingdom was changing, Rúni supposed he would have to adapt, or fade into obsolescence.

He chose a simple name. A Nordic name, one popular in his country. Sigurd. He told Emil first, his reaction was one to expect from his brother who hated change as much as he.

"What was wrong with Rúni?" Emil frowned.

"Nothing." Sigurd stated.

It wasn't a satisfying answer to Emil. The kid stomped his foot, "Then why change?"

Denmark came in afterward, praising Sigurd for coming to his senses and choosing a new name. Emil stormed out, yelling about how he will refuse to call Sigurd by any new name. Denmark laughed, patting Sigurd on the shoulder.

"He'll come around sooner or later."

Denmark's words turned out to be true. Rúni turned to Rú, to Sigurd, then Siggý. He didn't know how to feel about the change, with even his most stubborn advocate letting this change happen.

The name change was the least of his worries, as he and Denmark found themselves in the middle of a war. Their most common foe would be Sweden, who always took the charge to prove his strength. The reason behind the fights spanned between religion, the war, and Sigurd.

This greatly distressed Emil, who would constantly tug on Sigurd's dress. "You're going to leave?"

"Who says I am leaving?"

"He says Sweden is trying to get you."

Sigurd knelt to the boy's level. "I promised I would stay, didn't I?" And by god, he would fight to stay with Emil, if nothing else.

Emil called him a liar.

A disgusting liar.

He said he wouldn't leave him alone. Yet, the end of the war came and the prize for Sweden winning was Norway. Gone was his union with Denmark, and the end of his time with his little brother.

Sigurd was whisked away from Copenhagen, and by god he was not happy.

He was still a territory, a replacement for Finland.

Sigurd refused to speak, to acknowledge Sweden's presence. Not when wishing him a good day, nor when invited to dine with him. Sigurd would rather starve than play the perfect territory for two bickering nations.

Year after year, He ran to the nations' desk, slamming the bid on the surface below him. He would keep his hand there until Sweden looked up. The man was tired when Sigurd stormed in.

"Sweden."

"Sigurd."

"If we are equals, you will refer to me as Norway. I am not a human under your control." He pushed the paper to Sweden. "And more so, if we are equals, you will grant me my independence."

Sweden let out a deep, deep sigh, staring at the paper. He rubbed his eyes, squinting at the lettering on the page.

"You've fought hard, Norway," He handed the signed paper to Sigurd. "Take this to the king, and pray he will be merciful."

Sigurd nodded, holding the paper tightly. It was his only chance of being his own again.

"And Norge," Sweden said, causing the man to turn around. "I hope one day we'll be on good terms."

Clutching the paper, Sigurd nodded in agreement. "I've prayed for that since the start of our union."

At the turn of the century, the King gave support for Norwegian independence. For the first time in centuries, Sigurd was the sole Kingdom of Norway again. He was independent, and free.

2009.

Centuries of fighting, of diplomacy, of trade and negotiation, all were given up for a simpler life.

It wasn't just Norway who settled down at this point, all of his fellow nations have. Denmark, brushed aside his anger and became well-known for businesses. Sweden and his carpentry became widely known around the world. Norway supported their endeavors. Their region was leaving a positive mark on the world.

A sound chimed from his computer. An email popped up from Denmark, inviting everyone to a get-together. It wasn't surprising it came from him, Dane's most recent mission was to get all of the Nordics together.

Replies flooded in until it was up to Norway to respond. Finland quickly dropped formalities, begging him to join in.

Come on, Norja!

Give it a rest, Fin. He won't reply.

No, no, I made sure he got this message. Norge, join in! Denmark added.

The emails died down, and Norway could breathe. Denmark, unfortunately, was right. It was a new century, and there hadn't been conflicts between the five of them for a while. It wouldn't hurt for him to meet up, to be with his family once again.

Hesitantly, Norway typed his confirmation message and promptly shut off the blasted machine.

Norway was met with quiet chatter as he entered the room. Denmark set up the get-together like those reunions shown in American shows. A name tag on the lapel, *like we can't recognize one another...*

Each seat had a small placard for each of the members attending-country name and human name. He took note of each change. Iceland kept the name he had when the two last properly talked to one another, Emil, as did Sweden with Berwald. Denmark and Finland decided on a change, however, and Norway took note. He supposed this was the chance to get to know them... to know his family on a human level once more.

"No more Kristiarn!" Denmark stated when he saw Norway staring at his name tag. "New century, new me, you know!"

The Dane's laugh echoed as Norway examined Finland's new name.

"Timo, hm?" He raised an eyebrow at Finland's new name. "Why the

"Ah, well, you have to accept a change in pace every once in a while," He smiled. "Just because we're immortal doesn't mean we have to stay static in what we were originally, right? ...Besides, having a new name is sort of like a fresh start for me." change?"

"That's..." Norway paused, thinking. "Very profound."

"Of course! Why don't you change your name, Sigurd?" Finland referred to his human name. It's been a long time since any nation called him by a human name. Hell, even the humans took to calling him Norway nowadays. There were many reasons why he kept his names for such long periods of time. It was his history, names he bestowed upon himself, or others have given him. It told him who he was throughout the time he existed. A secret, a victor... yet Finland's words stuck with him.

...Should he change his name?

He cycled through names he heard on the streets, names he's seen in books, ones with specific meanings. If he were to change his name right there, he will be deliberate about it. In some ways, he was almost content with keeping Sigurd. It was his name, a name still used in his country... Yet, if even Timo, a nation who had not changed his name throughout the time Norway knew him, it wouldn't hurt to change.

His mind cycled through names: Leif, Nils... none felt like it fit. Yet, there was one. 'Bringer of Light'. It wasn't a name originating in his region, yet Norway felt strangely warm towards it. Lukas, Germanic in nature, and a name rising in popularity amongst his people. Oh... why not. Norway took a pen from his pocket, placing a sticky note over Sigurd and with neat handwriting, he sealed in his decision for a new name.

"What's wrong with Sigurd?!" Iceland frowned. He was still less keen on change than Norway was.

"Nothing."

"Then why change it?"

A smirk formed on Norway's face, "Why not?" Denmark looked at the sticky note, tapping his fingers on his glass, "Lukas, Lukas, Lukas..." A smile formed on his face, "It fits you. Congrats on joining us in the 21st century."

Finland clapped, "It's so hip!" Iceland grumbled, "He's not hip, he's just..."

Sweden hummed, "I think it's nice."

For once in centuries, the family was together. And the family was getting along. There were no wars, no unions, no animosity towards any particular nation... right now they were five nations, five men who wanted their family. Their region.

The Nordics all wanted the best for each other now, and Norway was content with keeping it that way.



THE COLOUR OF LIFE

WRITTEN BY: PHYRIPO

Hey, Maarten, are you closing up?"

Jolting, Maarten blinked at the voice behind him. He turned on his saddle chair to find Søren leaning against the doorway of his workspace.

"What?" he asked him.

"I'm going home. Can you lock up?"

"Sure," Maarten replied absently.

Søren shook his head while he looked at the painting behind him. It took up almost the whole wall of the small space and was taller than Maarten.

"Your girlfriend's almost finished, huh?"

Maarten glared at him. Søren grinned before lifting a hand and ducking out, calling a goodbye.

He was right, the painting was nearing completion. A life-sized portrait of a woman, Maarten had been chipping away at the piece for months between commissioned works. It was an unusual passion project; he gravitated towards landscapes and still-lives, and when he did portraiture for fun, the subjects were mostly men, as Maarten had no real interest in women despite the joking nickname.

But this painting, of this tall woman with her turquoise dress and dimpled cheeks, had demanded to be painted.

Today, Maarten could finish it. He'd spent all afternoon trying to mix the perfect shade of green, creating swatch after swatch with oil paints and never getting what he wanted. Though the differences were minute, he knew the exact shade this woman's eyes should be.

Now, with the right hue of deep, mossy green on his brush, Maarten bent forward and filled it in. Still wet, the woman's eyes glinted in the bright lights. As if she were alive.

"Finally," Maarten breathed. Taking a step back, he looked at the whole piece.

He'd painted a vague background; rolling hills and a field of red flowers, the same color as her lips. Many shades of brown had gone into her hair, from copper to dark chocolate, and Maarten had studied photographs of stars from the fifties to get her curls just right where they emerged from a green headband.

"What am I going to do with you?" he wondered aloud.

For now, he just tidied his workspace, and left the painting in the shared studio when he locked up to bike home through the summer evening. It'd still be there tomorrow.

Although Maarten had strange dreams filled with green eyes and red flowers, he was in a good mood when he arrived at the studio in the morning. On the outskirts of the old city center, it was a small but open space above a bakery, where he picked up a croissant. He held it in his mouth as he unlocked the door.

There were some half-finished projects out; one of Simão's mosaics, a model Søren had built out of Lego. Trying not to get crumbs anywhere, Maarten checked his phone while he crossed the floor to his workspace.

He looked up, and froze.

"What..."

Behind him, the main door opened. Maarten whirled around to find Søren and Simão entering, chatting amicably.

"Good morning!" Søren greeted.

"Is it?" he asked through clenched teeth. Søren shrugged while Simão narrowed his eyes.

"What's up?"

"What's up—look!" Maarten gesticulated at his painting of the mysterious woman—or, rather, the lack of it.

Not the whole painting. The canvas was still there, the hills and flowers, but the woman was gone, as if he hadn't spent months laboring over details. As if she'd wandered off.

"You painted over your girlfriend?" Simão asked, perplexed. He knew the time Maarten had spent on this. They all did.

"She was here yesterday," Søren said. And, when Maarten glared, "You don't think we did anything? I might be an ass, but I'd never touch anyone else's work!"

Simão nodded vigorously.

"I know." Maarten's shoulders sagged. Although a prank would be the easiest explanation—and Søren was prone to those—it didn't make sense. He knew this was the exact background he'd painted, recognized every brushstroke and shade. The empty spot where the woman had been looked like he'd painted it himself. But it couldn't be, because the subject couldn't just have walked off the canvas.

"There's something here."

Jumping, all three men looked at the other side of the room, where Matthew stood by the emergency exit. None of them had heard him enter.

Maarten hurried over, and Matthew pointed at several fresh-looking drops of paint on the floor. They led to the door, and were turquoise, the same shade as the woman's dress. Which hadn't been wet for weeks.

Frowning, Maarten opened the door.

He emerged onto the roof of a neighboring building, looking out over the city. Immediately, he spotted her. Her hair really was all those shades of brown, glinting gold in the sunlight and moving in the breeze. The turquoise dress rippled around her knees. She turned to Maarten, who had frozen in shock.

"You said you didn't have a model!" Søren said accusingly behind him, only to be shushed by Matthew.

"Who... Are you?" Maarten asked, slowly stepping forward. His heart beat in his throat.

The woman, the woman he had painted and who was now real, smiled with those red lips. One cheek dimpled just as in the painting. She had freckles. Maarten feared he knew the position of every single one. They were very annoying to render in oil paint.

"It's good to see you," she breathed.

"Wh-why are you Belgian?" Maarten blurted. The accent was unmistakable.

The woman pursed her lips and put her hands on her hips, which made Maarten feel like a boy getting scolded.

"I mean—" He hadn't been thinking she was Belgian when he painted her. It seemed oddly specific.

Of course, that wasn't the most pertinent question, but it was easier to address than how his painting had come alive.

"I'm Maarten," he offered, unsure what else to say.

"Maarten? That's possible." She shook her head but continued, "I'm Manon, then."

"You are." He'd never told anyone, but she'd been Manon from the first brushstroke. "I might've... Created you."

"Perhaps." Manon stepped forward. Touched his shoulder.

She felt sun-warmed and real, and smelled sweet rather than like paint. Like pastries, or chocolate. Her eyes were just as green as he'd painted them last night. Eyes that green were rare. In fact, the only time he'd come across that exact shade was... On himself.

"Or, maybe," she continued, red lips curling, "I should already have been here, Netherlands."

That might be scarier—and was she really calling him Netherlands because he wasn't Belgian?

Maarten quickly touched the hand clasping his shoulder, meeting her eye.

"I guess we'll find out," he said, because whoever, whatever she was, she was his responsibility. Good thing that painting hadn't been commissioned. It'd be hard to explain how a Belgian woman had escaped from the canvas.

Why was she Belgian, though?

There was no guide for what to do when your artwork came alive.

Simão was telling Søren and Matthew about some myth when Maarten took the woman inside. Manon blinked at the three men as if trying to remember who they were. Rather than lingering there, they went over to her painting. She ghosted her fingertips over the brushstrokes.

"Do you remember being... There?" Maarten asked. The field of flowers looked endless without her.

"Not exactly. But there's something." She wrapped her arms around herself, staring into the middle distance. "I remember you. I remember... It's hard to say. But somehow, you've always been there."

Did that mean she'd already existed somewhere and Maarten had summoned her here? Was there a hole in reality where she had been? He hadn't anticipated this, going into art.

"I would've liked to see the painting. You're a professional artist?"

"I am. Spent a long time working in sales, but I make enough from art now."

"*Tiens*, who'd have guessed that, after you immediately started selling Spain weapons during the Twelve Years' Truce!"

"I needed money!" Maarten replied, feeling a well-worn irritation wash over him. Manon's eyes widened while he blinked in confusion. For a moment, he envisioned her in a Golden Age noblewoman's getup, hair hidden under an elaborate headpiece, as if he'd painted her that way—he swore he could smell the ingredients he would've used to make his oil paints back then. He probably would have used something toxic in search of the right pigment for her eyes.

"You're still here," she said now. "And I'm here too. And I think we need to figure out why."

Maarten ended up taking her home, through Delft on the back of his bike. She was silent, one arm wrapped around his middle.

"Are you alright?" he asked her when they stopped in front of his houseboat.

"It's different," she shrugged, "but I feel like it's been more different before." Then, not elaborating on that cryptic statement, she seemed to notice where they were. "Maarten, how fitting! You've always been fond of sailing."

"Have I?" He had been, but she couldn't know.

She smiled. "Yes."

"Well, this boat isn't going anywhere." He gestured her down the gangway and inside. "You can stay here for now."

"For free?" she joked.

"You're my responsibility."

Maarten watched her walk around his living room, water gently lapping at the walls. She looked at his souvenirs, books and flowers, and he wondered if she recognized any of it.

"Do you want to go to Belgium?" he asked her, as she was inspecting his guidebooks. He didn't have one about Belgium; it always seemed unnecessary.

Looking up, Manon slowly nodded.

"Okay. We can take the train to Antwerp, I guess?" Part of Maarten balked at the thought of spending money on an unnecessary train ride, but it might help them figure out who Manon was—who she seemed to think he was. He took out his phone to check for tickets. Manon sat down on the couch next to him and watched curiously.

"56 euros..." he muttered. "Times two." He should've painted her some cash. Sure, he could afford it. That didn't mean he enjoyed it. Manon elbowed him teasingly.

"Money must roll," she said, in an exaggerated Dutch accent. Maarten was startled into laughter.

He had to put in their names, and used his own surname for her; after all, they looked like they could be related. Hopefully, no one would ask for Manon's passport.

"Maarten Koopman," she read. "Merchant? Oh, I've told you, that's too on the nose a surname!"

"I can't help my dad's surname."

"You have parents!" Manon exclaimed.

"Everyone has those—"

"Any siblings?"

"I—" He looked at her. "No."

"Well, I think that might have changed."

"That's not how that works."

"Maarten, I came out of a painting. If I say I'm your sister, I'm your sister."

"Can I be the elder sibling?" he asked her, and she bopped him on the head.

Later, after they ate dinner together, Manon had to borrow Maarten's clothes to sleep in. He promised to take her into the city for clothes, and he drifted off trying to figure out his budget for that. His dreams were full of green eyes.

The next day consisted mostly of Manon charming people with her accent and her easy smiles as they shopped. She insisted on buying more red lipstick, although she seemed overwhelmed by the many choices. Maarten tried to leave her to get undergarments alone, but she seemed to delight in teasing him about his awkwardness so he stubbornly stuck by her. It did feel like being pestered by a sibling, at least if Matthew's tales about his brother were to be believed.

All three men texted to ask for updates, but Maarten didn't have much to say, other than they were going to Antwerp tomorrow. In fact, he picked up a little guidebook to the city at the tourist shop and looked through it while Manon tried on clothes.

Maarten thought they were done when she found some nice pieces, but then she started recounting what she would need for her hair, which he *knew* because he'd done all that research. If only he'd given her a pixie cut. She could have used his hair gel instead.

"You're going to sink my house with all this," he complained, carrying some of her bags.

"If your big head hasn't sunk it, nothing will!" she said cheerily. Maarten sent a mental apology to Matthew for every time he dismissed his complaining about his brother's teasing.

The train ride to Antwerp went smoothly; no one asked for Manon's ID and the trains all ran on time. The only odd thing was her suddenly sitting up straight and declaring, "We're in Belgium now," which was, as far as Google Maps was concerned, correct, but there was no way she could have known. Maarten decided to just accept it.

This continued in Antwerp, where she seemed more at home than in Delft. He followed her through back alleys until they suddenly emerged onto a busy square bordered by tall, narrow houses; the whole thing looked extremely, indefinably, Belgian.

"It's different," Manon said once more, "but it's also the same." She looked up at the huge building on the other side of the square, where many flags were flying. The wind carried the smell of the harbor. Maarten rifled through his guidebook to find out what they were looking at, but he needn't have bothered.

"City hall," Manon told him. "It was quite new when you were first here."

There was a flash before Maarten's eyes, reminding him of a memory that couldn't be his. The flags and the statue on the square weren't there, and he felt exhausted. Manon was wearing that Golden Age dress and standing next to a man who looked a lot like Simão, who was calling Maarten the wrong thing.

"It's not Holland anymore," Maarten muttered, squinting against the sun.

"He never did learn," Manon said brightly. She linked their arms.

Viciously, Maarten thought that he had absolutely learned, he just couldn't be bothered, but the memory had faded and it stopped making sense again.

"Do you think we can go inside?" Manon was asking.

They couldn't, and maybe that was for the best. Maarten felt overwhelmed. He kept getting flashes of memories, contextless and not all of them lining up with the seventeenth-century timeline. He read in his guidebook that the Twelve Years' Truce was signed in this building. Some version of him had been there, but had also been here centuries before and after. Quite often with Manon. He remembered sailing the Scheldt on many ships, meeting Manon and being envious of her, then pitying her. They wandered slowly, Manon evidently lost in thought as well.

Eventually, they made it to the river, next to part of an old fortress that was crawling with tourists.

On some instinct, Maarten wrapped an arm around Manon's shoulders. She leaned into him, and he imagined that was part of being her brother too.

"I don't understand," he said.

A large ship passed by. Maarten had the distinct impression that it shouldn't have fit, but the Scheldt was wider than he thought. He'd actually been to Antwerp before, but that was quite some time ago, so he had no idea why he thought that. Well, except...

"Are these... Past lives, or something?"

"No," Manon said softly. "No, just one, although I've had many names." She glanced up with a mischievous smile. "You've only had two, yet everyone still got it wrong, Holland."

"Flanders," he shot back. She stuck her tongue out. He watched her for a moment, trying to overlay all of those versions of her in his head onto this tall woman with her sparkling eyes and red lipstick. If he had painted her in a Renaissance dress, would she have stepped out speaking archaic Dutch and calling him Holland? Or would she have been the same person in a cumbersome dress? He didn't create her, he thought. She'd been somewhere.

In a way, that was reassuring. Maarten had no idea what he'd do given the power to create whole human beings, although he could imagine the guys' crude suggestions.

The man in those memories really looked a lot like Simão. What did that mean?

"Netherlands!" Manon snapped her fingers at him. "Maarten. Sorry."

"Netherlands is... Also fine." It didn't make sense, but it felt right. "As long as it's not Holland."

Suddenly, Manon wrapped both arms around him. He slowly embraced her, and for a long moment, they just stood there in the sun.

"You've said that thing before," Maarten mumbled. "That if you say you're my sister, you are."

"It's still true."

"Yes." It was true. "That'll be hard to explain to my mother."

She hiccupped a laugh, then suddenly disentangled herself and said, "Well, we should go and eat some fries!"

"What?"

"I'm Belgian, aren't I?"

"Belgium," he said.

"Belgium," she agreed with a smile.

They had fries for lunch, and Manon had many opinions.

When they crossed the border again, Maarten felt something too.

A frisson at the back of his mind, chattering and buzzing like a living thing. Like the Netherlands, maybe, its way-too-many people all living their lives.

It felt right.

"How was your excursion?" Søren asked when Maarten entered the studio. "And where's your girlfriend?"

"Sister."

"That's not how that works, dude."

"Turns out it does. Very informative excursion. Manon will be by later."

Delft wasn't a hugely important city when it came to history with Belgium, but she might have been here in that other life, and something might stir in her memory. Maybe something that could tell her if they should somehow be those people again. If there were others. Maarten looked at Søren, who grinned.

"If she's your sister, can I ask her on a date?" he joked—and a flash of memory jumped into Maarten's head.

"I've said before, you're free to ask, but if she laughs in your face, that's on you."

"Have you said that before?" Søren asked faintly as Maarten turned to his studio space, where the empty canvas was still up. "Matt, has he said that before?"

"Could be, sounds familiar," Matthew replied.

Maarten started doing some sketches for a commission he'd received. With his other hand, he idly doodled on a notepad, which was a habit. Some vague scribbles usually emerged. Although he could use both hands equally well, it took a lot of concentration to actually draw with both.

When Manon came in, it startled him. Belgium? It felt weird to call a person that.

"Why did Søren ask if I like chocolate? Just because I'm—oh, that's eerie!"

Maarten looked down at his notepad, which was now filled with... Eyes.

He picked it up. Manon tilted her head. Some of the eyes were partially obscured by the thin lines of sketched hair. It was a little eerie, but... Swiveling, Maarten grabbed the final swatch he'd done for Manon's eye color, and held it next to the sketches.

"Oh," Manon breathed.

Hands shaking slightly, Maarten flipped the page over.

The eyes belonged to a young man, he quickly decided—or already knew—with the same upturned nose as Manon and the same arched eyebrows as Maarten, one hidden behind wavy hair.

"I'm never going to make any money if this continues," he sighed, because he could feel in his soul that he would have to paint this man and his waistcoat and his green eyes.

"That's never happened, Maarten."

They both stared at the sketch as if willing the man to just step out. "Well," Manon said, "I do feel more like a middle child."





THE POTLUCK

WRITTEN BY: SCARLETTLILLIES

ÆSTI - ÆSMASPÆV (MONDAY)

When Estonia rubbed the sleep from his eyes, his glasses nudged just above his eyebrows, and was then gently readjusted onto his nose. His body begged him to rest but his mind remained restless. There was no reason for it, at least not that Estonia could pinpoint, but sometimes the two just didn't cooperate with one another.

On nights like these, he retreats to his piano in the living room where it sat comfortably between two bookshelves against the wall. Music filled the room as his fingers glided across the keys. When he was locked away in his own world, he was free to run wild and play something of his own creation. Though there was no reason for it, the music he decided tonight was sombre in tone.

Estonia wasn't keeping tabs on the large wooden clock ticking behind him. One song became two, and two became three. But his eyes flew open when the sound of a loud chime coming from his phone on top of the piano interrupted the fourth song, startling him as his fingers hit the wrong set of keys. A frustrated groan escaped his lips when he turned to see it was almost one in the morning on the clock.

"Who's texting me at this hour?" he frowned as he reached for his phone on top of the piano. His irritation was quickly forgotten once he saw Finland's name above a text message on the screen.

Are you still going to the potluck this weekend?

Estonia was drawing a blank. Potluck? What potluck? *Oh—*

He had completely forgotten about the potluck that Belgium was organizing. Her invite was still sitting on his coffee table, and had been there for nearly two weeks.

Another text came through.

And don't leave me on read!! I know you're still up.

Finland ended his text with a cheeky emoji which drew a small chuckle. He typed out a quick response while walking from his piano bench to his favourite lounge chair by the window.

I'm not leaving you on read! Just needed a moment to think. I honestly forgot about the potluck. Why are YOU still up?!

I'm in Canada with my boss for a meeting. It's still evening here. And you didn't answer the question!

Right. He forgot about that too.

Sorry. I accepted Belgium's invite but I'm still unsure if I should go.

After a few minutes of waiting, it was now Finland's turn to leave him hanging. Estonia leaned back into his chair and he turned his focus towards the bookshelves. Not only were they filled with books about music, computers, folklore, and space; they contained the sentimental pieces of his past. Little wooden figurines dressed in various folk costumes and framed photographs decorated several shelves. Some photos were recent: like the one on the second shelf when he invited the Nordics and the two Baltics to celebrate Midsummer at his cottage in Hiiumaa. Others like the one on the fourth and top shelf were from a by-gone era, a time when he was newly independent and his circle of friendships were smaller. Too much time had passed to remember why they were taken, but something in him felt the need to keep them displayed in his home.

Finally, Finland's reply came up when his phone chimed.

Why??? Everyone's excited to see you. Is it because of the last one?

Estonia was fixated at the screen as he thought carefully over his response. That played a big part in it—not just for him but for Latvia and Lithuania too. Canada had done his best to play host; but once America arrived with too many surprise guests, all of which were celebrities, the party couldn't be contained. The three of them largely stayed at their table, completely ignored by everyone else, including by those they considered their friends. Much of the food they brought had gone to waste by being left uneaten. The three of them agreed they were done with potlucks for the time being after that night.

He never got a chance to form a reply before Finland sent over a follow-up text.

I'm guessing that's a yes. I'm sorry about last time but this one will be different! It's just a potluck for us Europeans this time. I promise, people want you there. I want you there! Please come.

Damn it Finland, Estonia thought. Adding a sad emoji felt so tacky, but he knew how to tug on his heartstrings when it came to words.

Fine. But only because you're going too. What should I bring?

Can you bring that rhubarb pie from last time? I'm still having dreams about that thing.

For the first time that night, it felt like Estonia could finally smile.

Sure. It's a deal.

LATVIJA - TREŠDIENA (WEDNESDAY)

Latvia was ready to throw his phone into the river. Everyone wouldn't stop texting him after he stormed out of a meeting with the other Baltic leaders present.

The number of unread messages had taunted him all afternoon. They kept coming even as he was typing a reply to Belgium's text over his attendance to the potluck. He was doing his best to keep his words as courteous as possible. It wasn't her fault that he was in such a sour mood.

Yeah, I'm still coming. I'll bring a honey cake.

Latvia heisted for a brief moment before clicking send. He really didn't want to attend. But if Estonia and Lithuania were going, then so was he.

He didn't bother waiting for a response from Belgium. Instead, he chose to shut off his phone completely and tucked it inside his grey work bag that was draped off his left shoulder. Dark clouds were rolling in from the west. A storm was on its way and he needed to head home soon.

Weaving through the crowds of locals and tourists alike, he took a detour through Brīvības bulvāris instead of heading back towards Riga Castle where he started his journey. There was no real reason for him come by here, as his home was located across the bridge in Agenskalns. But Latvia couldn't shake off the anger he felt in his chest. Each time the words replay in his mind, he clenches his jaw and his emotions reach a tipping point.

"Wish we had someone like them instead of him."

Even though most of the attendees didn't hear that, Lithuania and Estonia did. No one in the room was prepared for their wrath as they shouted "Show some respect!" in unison. Their glares were cold as everyone watched in fear, unsure what had just taken place. The man behind him, a recent hire who was fresh out of university, was beet-red as he was quickly ushered out of the room.

The only thing the president could do was wipe the sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief, praying that the incident wouldn't make the press.

Latvia couldn't decide at that moment whether he wanted scream, cry, punch him in the mouth, or all of the above. It was one thing to be mistaken as a teenager—something he faced on a regular basis—but the thought that one of his own citizens didn't think he was worthy enough to represent them? He was a man who over a thousand years old, been through Hell and back with the scars to prove it, and yet that had to have been the deepest wound anyone could have dealt to him. He wished he could have given him a piece of his mind, but all he could do was run away in shame.

Light raindrops began to dampen his black suit when he passed by a small group of tourists who were snapping photos of the Freedom Monument. A woman could be heard speaking English in a heavy Latvian accent, and was explaining the history of the monument to the crowd.

Latvia's gloomy eyes met with that of the woman crafted in stone on top of the monument. Every time he came here, he always felt her stare right through his chest.

If only they knew what you've become...

LITUVA - PENKTADIENIS (FRIDAY)

Lithuania's eyes felt so heavy staring at the monitor. This was his third time reviewing this press release and yet he was still finding errors in the document. He cursed loudly as he pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course, this all had to happen on a Friday.

Unbeknownst to him, one of the ministers was standing in the doorway of his office. With a knock on the door, Lithuania looked up from his desk, looking visibly exhausted with dark circles underneath his eyes.

"You're here late. Everyone else left more than an hour ago."

"I have some translation work for one of our embassies to finish," Lithuania explained. "This one has to go out on Monday morning but I keep finding mistakes every time I look over it. I guess my German isn't what it used to be."

Lithuania cracked a nervous laugh to lighten the mood but the minister's expression remained stone-cold.

"You need to go home. You look horrible."

"Thanks," Lithuania replied sarcastically. "I'll be fine. One more hour and I should be done."

Lithuania wasn't prepared for the minister to walk into his office and push down on the lid of his laptop, forcing the system into sleep mode. He was about to protest but was immediately cut off.

"Go. Home." The minister stressed. "Don't make me get the President on the phone."

Knowing he had no way out of this, Lithuania groaned and admitted defeat. "Fine. You win."

Lithuania began packing up his laptop and notebooks into his leather briefcase. When he reached to grab his water bottle, the small calendar next to the monitor caught his eye. The following day had been circled repeatedly in a red pen. His eyes quickly grew wide.

"What's wrong?"

"I completely forgot about Belgium's potluck tomorrow," Lithuania bit his bottom lip lightly when he anxiously turned to face the minister. "I don't even know what to bring."

The minister shrugged his shoulders, "It's a potluck, so you can bring anything you want, right? I'm sure you'll figure it out." He walked up to Lithuania and gently patted his shoulder, both to comfort him and to signal that he needed to speed things up. "Now hurry up. I'll walk you to your car."

Lithuania struggled to shake off the nerves when he placed the calendar back in its proper spot on his desk. It wasn't like him to forget an important event. He rushed to pack the rest of his belongings and the two men walked out together. The minister carried much of the conversation, mainly asking if Latvia was doing alright after what took place at the meeting in Riga, as they walked down a flight of stairs that led towards the main lobby of the building.

At some point during their conversation, the minister made an off-hand comment about a dish Lithuania shared with them at a recent event. It was as if a light-bulb went off in his mind when he snapped his fingers. The minister had never seen Lithuania's green eyes beaming with so much excitement.

"Tinginys! I can bring Tinginys to the potluck!"

FINALE - LAUPÄEV / ĒSTDIENA / ĒSTADIENIS (SATURDAY)

"Look who decided to finally show up!"

The late-evening sun was beaming down on Estonia and Lithuania as the two men stood in the driveway of Belgium's vacation home. In the distance, Latvia could be seen walking towards the property with a bag in each hand.

"Sorry to keep you guys waiting." Latvia said as he pulled a bottle of Latvian balsam from one of his bags. "But you can't show up to a party without a gift for the host."

Estonia's arms were crossed when he rolled his eyes, "You bought that for yourself. You know Belgium isn't going to drink any of that. The least you could have brought was some wine."

"Did not!" Latvia shouted. "I just thought I'd share a drink with everyone that's popular from my home. And if I'm the only one that ends up drinking it, so be it."

Once Latvia put this bottle back in his bag, he looked back up at Estonia and scoffed at him.

"And what about you? I don't see you holding any bags."

Estonia pointed towards the bag Lithuania was holding. He was about to speak up but Lithuania cut him off.

"It's in here with my cake," Lithuania said as he lifted the bag, looking deeply annoyed. He had enough of their bickering and began walking towards Belgium's door.

"If you two are done, let's head in. I'm roasting out here."

Estonia and Latvia looked at one another, sheepishly, and followed closely behind. Once at the door, the three men stood next to one another: Lithuania in the middle, Estonia to his right, and Latvia to his left.

"Alright, remember the plan," Lithuania said. "We stay for one hour and that's all."

"Works for me," Latvia replied. "It's not like anyone's going to notice we left."

Estonia hummed in agreement but he was starting to have second thoughts. If what Finland said was true, their night could be surprisingly different.

Lithuania raised his knuckle to knock, but to the group's surprise, the door flew open before he could. It was Belgium greeting them in the doorway with her bright green eyes and infectious smile.

"I knew I heard voices outside! I'm so glad you could make it."

She stepped aside and waved them in.

"Please come in! I can take your bags."

Belgium held out her right hand and the two men gave her their bags. Her voice trailed through the hallway as she retreated to the kitchen. "Oh! And the shoe racks are on your right in the closet. There's some spare slippers if you need them."

Lithuania and Estonia chose to stick with just their socks, while Latvia took the only pair of grey house slippers that would fit his small feet. Belgium could be heard humming a tune when the three of them passed by the kitchen. They were immediately captivated by her elaborate setup. Two tables were pushed together in the middle of the room and were draped with a cute strawberry-patterned tablecloth. Each guest had a handmade name tag with their assigned dish. They watched as Belgium carefully unwrapped all the dishes and placed them in their respective spots. She then pulled out the bottle of balsam which got an audible "Oooh!" from her—and a noticeable smirk from Latvia—before tossing the bags underneath the table.

She playfully winked at the trio, "Are you three going to stare at me all night?"

Lithuania and Estonia's cheeks flushed a light pink when they gave her a timid grin, while Latvia remained largely indifferent.

"Sorry," Estonia said, "We were just admiring the setup."

Lithuania nodded in agreement, "It's obvious you've put a lot of work into this."

She thanked them with her famous warm grin, "I love hosting events like these, so I'm always happy to go all out."

Belgium then turned towards the entrance of the living room, with the bottle of balsam cradled in her arms. She encouraged the three men to follow her.

"Now c'mon! Everyone's waiting to see you."

They did as they were told. When Belgium entered the room, she announced their arrival to the other guests and proceeded to make her way towards a gold-coloured serving cart by the window, where she left the bottle for everyone to enjoy. The three were taken aback when excitement erupted in the room.

Finland was the first to walk up to the group. He pulled Estonia in for a hug, not once spilling the glass of lager in his right hand.

"You made it!" Finland cheered, patting Estonia's back three times. Before Estonia could utter a word, Finland took him by the hand and pulled him towards the serving cart.

"You have to try this new beer Den brought. It's insanely good!"

From the sofa, the two men turned their heads to their left when a feminine voice called out Latvia's name. It was Liechtenstein, sitting with Iceland, tapping the empty seat between them.

"Come join us!"

Latvia couldn't stop himself from grinning when he made a dash to claim his place on the sofa. That left Lithuania all on his lonesome, but not for long when Hungary came over with two glasses of Fröccs. She handed him one, to which he graciously accepted with a thank you. A clear and bubbly liquid, he noticed it faintly tasted liked cucumbers when he took a quick sip.

"Glad you could finally make it," Hungary said. "Everyone was worried you guys weren't going to show up."

Lithuania froze as he caught her stare. "Seriously?"

Hungary nodded. "Yeah, you three were the last to sign-up. You know we're all have friends here right? You're always welcomed here."

A part of Lithuania remained skeptical, but deep down he knew Hungary's words were true. She wasn't the type to lie about something like that.

"Yeah, I know." Lithuania sighed. A sense of relief washed through him. "We get into our own heads sometimes."

Her smile softened, "I get it. We're all guilty of it. But you're here with us now and that's all that matters."

Hungary lifted her drink and offered a toast.

"Let's have some fun."

Hungary finally got him to smile, much to her delight. When he indulged in her offer, she was free to take Lithuania by the hand and lead him into the crowd of other nations, who were excitedly awaiting his arrival.

What was supposed to be an hour, became two, and then became three—or so the men thought. No one was keeping track anymore. It was moments like these that reminded them, they didn't just have each other to lean on.





CHAPTER TWO

SHIPPING

Of course, no fandom celebration could be complete without mentioning shipping. From popular ships to the rarest of rare pairs, this section is bound to have something you love.

Or perhaps, you just might find your new favourite on the way!





WE'LL BE FINE

WRITTEN BY: MAIVA

When Captain João makes his way to the ship's bow with a peculiar smile and telltale clearing of his throat, Quartermaster Abel knows to follow, give reassuring nods to the crew, and await the infamous phrase: *we'll be fine*.

Some call it a hunch, say he's got a good gut, while Abel would call it something simpler: experience. João has proclaimed the same thing during storms, or when an enemy ship appears on the horizon. He said it when they sailed out into thick fog and hit sharp rocks, and dared to laugh it when merfolk caught them off guard in a cove.

Time and again those words have left his lips, and even now with his hands clapped in irons, and the persistent threat of a pistol to his back, João looks to his companion and vows, still smiling, that despite how things seem, they'll be fine. He treads the long, foreboding path made of saltwashed stone, casts his gaze skywards and lets out a soft sigh.

"Gloomy atmosphere," he says, watching birds circle them from above. Some land upon posts which line the path, and peck at cages containing old bones. The unfortunate prisoners sway in cold winds, yet still João's will does not bend. He's the picture of ease when he turns to Abel, even with hair blown into his face. "What do you make of our inn, Quartermaster?"

Abel pulls a face, looking ahead. A pirate fort is hardly an inn, especially when it belongs to those who want them dead. Before them a great pair of doors slowly open, while men stand guard in narrow windows further up, angling ranged weapons their way. On either side of the path big waves hit jagged rocks, dampening hair and clothes with its spray. "I'll suggest, as always, that you be careful. One day you'll lose your tongue."

"Perhaps, but not today," João laughs. He regards the pair of sailors behind them next, who startle upon making eye contact and jab their pistols forward in warning. "What say you, gentlemen? Is your home cosy?"

"You what?"

"A rating out of ten will do," João insists. "Take the food, for instance. What's it like?"

"There'll be none for you if you don't shut up!"

"Ah, so we *will* be fed?"

"*I said shut up!*"

"Looks like you'll never know," Abel snorts, watching João's teeth bare in a grin. "I might share some of mine, if you're lucky."

"How bold to think they'll feed *you*," João shoots back, following the other's stare towards the fort entrance. Further up the line some new prisoners panic, they dig their heels in protest and shout.

The loudest is dealt with quickly; throat cut, body hurled into the waves, which prompts the rest—fellow crewmates, perhaps—to swallow any further objections.

"Gloomy atmosphere," João repeats, grabbing Abel's attention.

"We've seen worse."

João concurs, humming a little tune. "Indeed, Abel. We'll be fine."

"Well then..." Abel murmurs, rubbing wrists now free of their fetters.

"This is it. Our cell."

"Our humble abode." João throws out his arms, acting as if the damp and the moss between stones is decoration, and the pile of straw in the corner a four poster bed. He gets on tiptoes to peer out the narrow window, where a freezing gale blows bangs from his forehead. "A pair of curtains would help."

"You mean a gunpowder keg." Abel wrinkles his nose. "Blow the place up and start again."

"This is a cell, Amor," João says, pointedly. "You came here with me willingly. And against my orders, I might add."

"I know."

"The enemy wanted me and me alone. You didn't need to offer yourself as well, when my surrender was enough to ensure the crew's safety."

"*I know.*"

The truth is like dust on Abel's clothes. He promptly turns to brush it away, feeling the burn of João's stare upon his nape. They've had this discussion in the enemy's brig, arguing in low whispers to avoid stirring the guards. João made his frustrations known morning and night, until time became a salve and the captain grew tired, knowing better than to turn his companion against him when they were bound for a place which wished them harm.

In the miserable cell, João grabs fistfuls of straw and sets it on the floor by the wall, planting his arse upon it shortly after. Abel follows suit like his larger, silent shadow. When they bump shoulders the pair exchange glances. Water falls from the ceiling. *Drip. Drip.*

"Stubborn mule." João draws up his knees and leans, using his weight in a vain effort to move Abel. When the man barely tilts, his frame tough as cell walls, João expels a hefty breath and prods his arm instead. "People won't forget what you did, you understand? You went against your captain before the crew and the enemy, and yet..." He finds Abel's stare, deciding to prod him again. "I can't be angry with you forever. Your loyalty is unlike anything else. Perhaps more than I deserve."

"That's not true."

"And there you go, rebelling again," João remarks, albeit amused. "I've always liked that about you."

"Two chunks of bread. Is that really it?"

"Beggars can't be choosers." Abel holds their meagre meal in one hand, while João contemplates the accompanying jug of mead. He's likely measuring how far it'll stretch, assuming no further food or drink will arrive until morning, and also feeling the sting called 'consequence'.

"My tongue did cause us trouble," he sulks, looking to Abel to express a wordless apology. "You take the bigger piece of bread."

"I'm not hungry right now."

"You might be later."

Abel can't argue either way, adopting his seat beside João once more. He turns their food slowly to inspect it, and sets it on his lap for safe keeping. "I doubt they planned to feed us well to begin with," he says, and for what it's worth, João's good mood returns. Harsh lines in his face begin to smooth, until all that remain are the crow's feet by his eyes. Abel can't help but count the pleasant wrinkles when they're close, recalling decades of laughter which have formed such marks.

Ever since they were children João was the joker, the charmer, of their port town. A boy with dreams far bigger than fishing nets, and a willpower so great some adults saw it as a threat.

Worst of all, he inspired many others, desperate children keen to bask in his glow, and yet it wasn't those wannabe devils who caught João's eye, but the cooper's quiet son, Abel, who stood out by simply living as he pleased, making barrels as opposed to trouble.

The unlikely friendship eased the town's concerns. The try-hard children stopped seeking João's attention. For a time all was well, until the boys reached their teens, at which point their eyes remained fixed on the sea, and they clung to the hope of better things beyond the waves.

Somewhere in the brine, they saw freedom. Joined the navy and were sorely disappointed. The seniors on their ship were worse than the townsfolk, ridiculing every rope knot they tied, and their appearance. Even when fingers blistered and bled their commander called them lazy, while a single curl of hair out of place saw them beaten. Branded a disgrace to their naval uniform.

"Abel...?" João's voice brings him back. Eyes the colour of wild seas bear concern. "You've been staring, what is it?"

"Just thinkin'."

"Of what?"

"Of us, our past," Abel elaborates. João fetches his cup and brings it to his lips, savouring whatever's left at the bottom. Judging by the distant stare he's thinking too. The hard line of his mouth which appears is a grim sign. The naval days weren't their favourite, but a necessary hardship. He startles at the hand that comes to cover his own.

"Quartermaster." João clears his throat. He doesn't reject Abel's hand. "Focus on the present, rather than ghosts. I'm still wondering what to do with you."

"With me?"

"Yes, you." The captain tries and fails to hide his amusement. "As I said before, you disobeyed me in public. If I am to maintain the respect of my crew, I must make an example of you."

"A'right." Abel's free hand picks at the bread. He chews with the manner of a grazing cow. "What you got this time? Keelhauling?"

"No, you'll make a mess of my ship."

"Charming."

"I could hang you by your ankles from the bow," João suggests, "low enough that the waves will slap your face, but not so low that you'll drown."

"How thoughtful. A half-drowned corpse would only ruin such a beautiful ship."

"I knew you'd understand." A snicker follows. João flips his hand so their palms are touching. Calloused fingers weave together on instinct. "Failing that," he goes on, still entertained, "I thought to shoot you in the buttocks so you can't sit for weeks."

"That's cruel, Captain. Very cruel."

"Oh, I can do worse," João promises. "I'll let Arthur handle the ship's assets."

Abel pales. The chewing stops. His free hand slaps his bread to stop it rolling to the floor, and a familiar glint of mischief from João holds like a vice. "That is worse, much worse," he concedes. "The last time you gave that man such control, he blew it all on ale and meat at the next port."

"And a great time was had, albeit briefly." João pauses, grimacing at the memory of too much partying, followed by near starvation and a ship of fuming sailors. "At any rate, Amor, I jest. The crew knows very well why you came to my aid. As do I."

"That so?"

"It is so." João draws near, meeting lips which turn to his for a kiss. The bread is forgotten, tumbles to the cell stones. In its place hands find long hair and the curve of João's waist beneath his coat, enjoying the sole source of warmth in their prison.

A coin flips through the air. It hits the empty jug and bounces off, landing on the stones with a clatter. The downturned C of Abel's mouth speaks of his displeasure, a sight which forces João to hide behind raised knees, shoulders shaking as he swallows his amusement.

"I'm not good at this game," Abel mutters. The still-juddering captain appears to agree. An ear pricks to listen for the guards doing rounds, and once it's safe Abel crawls towards the coin, returning it to his pocket. "We should do somethin' else."

"Like what?" João lifts his head, cheeks flushed from holding his laughter. "We've already plotted our revenge against this lot and each other, and talked of what we might've done had we stayed in our home town. Do you propose we look back again, as the heavens surely do, and scrutinise every choice which has brought us to this dingy, poorly hosted establishment?"

"Yes." Abel joins him by the wall, where a curious hand comes to palm his cheek. João brushes over the skin then works his way higher, inspecting the scar above Abel's eye.

"You got this protecting me," João recalls, swallowing. "One of those 'we'll be fine's which wasn't fine at all. I made a mistake and—"

"I have no regrets," Abel interjects, taking João's hand in his own. "I'm proud of this scar."

"And what of the rest?" João looks downwards on instinct, knowing that beneath their clothes lay slithers of marred skin. Some caused by accidents or battles, or their time in service to a crown which didn't care.

"I think of them like a map," says Abel. "A record of where we've been."

"How poetic, but true," João admits, giving their hands a squeeze. With a lighter sigh he leans against the wall, gazing at the ceiling stones. The beautiful wash of sunset has faded, stripping the prison of colour, of any wonder. Night will make itself known soon enough. "I miss my hat."

"Where did that come from?"

"My lips," João says, ever the joker. "It aches me to think it might be missing."

"Francis took it while our hands were being bound. He's probably wearing it right now."

"That's true." João fakes a gasp. "If it's still on his head when we return, it'll be the crow's nest for him."

"Aye, aye, Captain." Abel snorts, taking and dismissing the mental note. The image of the crow's nest entertains them both, as very few sailors have the stomach to be there long. In the wrong kind of clothing it's freezing, for starters, while others have complained of the terrible motions, and become sick to a point the ship's doctor said *enough*; *we'll have no men fit to sail if this keeps up*.

"I don't know how Arthur copes up there," João utters. "He was surely born for that role."

Abel hums. His way of saying yes. Though Arthur lacks the common sense to budget wisely, he possesses a spirit so reckless it's brave, and a thirst for their lifestyle which sets him apart. He's displayed the necessary prowess to be a captain yet won't leave, insisting that their vessel is where he'd rather be.

"You two are alike in that respect," João praises. "Sometimes I wonder how you manage, cope, with such a leader. I haven't made it easy for you lot."

"Don't take all the credit." Abel takes a sip of mead to wet his throat. "The ship's course is charted by us both. By all accounts if we die here—" he drinks some more, eyeing the small, barred window of their cell "—I should be killed alongside you as an equal."

"You want a flashy end, a captain-worthy ceremony?" João's smile turns into a smirk. He plucks the cup from Abel's grasp to drink as well. "Quartermaster, your ambition astounds me. Anyone else would say you stink of mutiny, but I know what you're like. You've barely changed since we were children."

"I have."

"Have not." João pokes out his tongue. "The ignorant townsfolk annoyed you to no end. They swore your father made those fine barrels, not you, and praised your uncles and grandfather too. Never did they give proper credit where due, or see the brilliant boy, and man, I've always known."

"I could say the same of you."

"What d'you mean?"

Abel reaches for the cup when it's offered, placing the drink by his side. To the frustration of his partner he doesn't speak right away, preferring to drag the wait out because he can, and because teasing João is so easy at times; a hard habit to break after all these years. "People called you a fool," he says eventually. "Said you couldn't leave the town, let alone escape the navy, yet here you are a captain. Respected. You've guided us through storms which ought to sink a normal vessel, and given us the freedom to live as we please."

"I can't see much freedom in here," João scoffs.

"We'll be out soon enough, as per your plan."

The captain's head tilts. Long hair tumbles with it. A stare-off ensues, conveying more than words ever could. João's tongue emerges to wet the top row of teeth, after which he laughs aloud to himself, and curses beneath a breath.

"You're terrifying at times, you know that?"

"Thank you."

"How long have you known?" João probes.

"You gave yourself away when you surrendered on our ship," Abel answers, "and you confirmed every theory on our voyage to this cell, largely when you sulked about my own surrender. You were willing to go because you would never be alone." He nods towards the cell door. "Our men are out there somewhere, aren't they? Mixed with the ones who guard this fort?"

João shrugs. It'll serve as a confession. "I knew that this time might come. I told the crew which flag colours to be aware of, and where those people called 'home' should I ever be captured. Also—" he snorts mid-thought "—when one sails a ship as large as our enemy's, it's hard to keep a track of crew numbers. A few brave souls hopped aboard while we were being bound, protected by the grand theatrics of our capture."

"That'll explain why you've drunk our supplies without a care," Abel realises. "You knew our stay wouldn't be long."

"Guilty, Your Honour." João's palms raise. "You have to admit it's been fun, hmm Abe? It's not everyday you get clapped in irons, and tossed into a cell."

"I'll bear your preferences in mind." Abel turns away to smile, although not quick enough. A hand cups his chin and brings him back. João's finger follows his mouth as it did his scar. Fascination, fondness, warms his features.

"Lucky me," João says, but not to tease. "That's a handsome look, Quartermaster, and while I wish you showed it more often, the selfish side of me prefers that you don't."

"I like that honesty, always have," Abel says, smiling harder. He places a chaste kiss to the other's fingertip. "And, since we're here, I might as well make my own confession."

João pulls back. "About what?"

"Nothin' bad." That much Abel can swear. Instead of answering via words he reaches into his coat, pulls out a collapsed spyglass, and extends the object to his love. "Here you are."

João's face is a picture. Confused, to say the least. "What use, pray tell, is that to me?"

"None at first glance, which is why it wasn't confiscated." Abel holds it vertically and twists the lens end. It pops off like a lid to the other's astonishment. Liquid splashes on a finger and is promptly licked clean.

"Quartermaster." João sits up straight, chest puffed. He can guess precisely what's inside, and inhales deep to resist the urge to snatch it. "How long have you been hiding rum on your person?"

"Far longer than you'll ever know." Abel snorts. "Want a proper drink while we await our rescue?"



BETWEEN THE CLIFFS, POUR TOUJOURS

WRITTEN BY: OH_MOOME0

Blanket curled beneath his arm, Arthur trudged across the soft sands, Oxfords sinking with each step. A full suit complete with leather dress shoes was a poor choice for a seaside picnic date, but he had ulterior motives for asking Francis out. Burning a hole into his pocket was a small velvet box, reminding him of its presence with every step he took. Twice now this question had spelt ruin for their relationship and anxiety questioned his sanity for daring to risk the tentative peace they had clawed back by asking for a third time.

But when he saw Francis, skipping ahead on a path unmarked by sight yet known to them both by heart, millennia seemed to fold in on itself and everything became clear. In the shimmer of sunlight and sea air, it's like he could see them all - every Francis he'd ever known scattered across the ages, walking along this trail. The lover, the diplomat, the soldier, the revolutionary, the corsair, the knight, the princess, and the boy; each one pausing to glance back at him with that same knowing glint in their eyes, as if every lifetime they'd lived had been leading them here.

Golden-brown hair fluttered in the wind as Francis stood waiting at the base of the cape, one hand shading his eyes as he smiled at Arthur. "Lay the blanket out here, mon petit lapin," He suggested, gesturing towards a dry patch of smooth sand. "We will have the perfect view of your dreary little island, so you don't get too home-sick, mm?"

Rolling his eyes, Arthur obliged, shaking the blanket out before letting it fall neatly to the ground. "Dreary, is it?" He prodded back, dropping down to tug on his shoelaces. "You say that now, but you still end up there every chance you get. You know you'd miss it if you couldn't see it."

"Miss it?" Francis laughed merrily, joining Arthur on the blanket and placing the basket between them. "Perhaps," He continued wistfully, gaze drifting towards Dover as he unlaced his own shoes. "Angleterre has been a fixture of my life for almost as long as I can remember. It is hard to imagine a life without it." Then, with a coy tilt of his head and a slight, almost mischievous glance to the side. "But, whether I would miss it? That is another question. It was never the island itself that I loved, you know."

How Francis could admit such mushy and sentimental things without baulking, he would never understand.

Merely on the receiving end of the compliment and already Arthur felt that his face was aflame.

Was thinking that he could handle this - a genuine proposal not one borne of obligation - foolhardy? When he had told his brothers of his plans, Alasdair laughed at him, Dylan encouraged him, and Sean simply raised an eyebrow.

Unaware of Arthur's inner turmoil, Francis had already unpacked the wicker basket with a flourish. "Voilà!" He announced proudly, gesturing to the spread before them. A golden quiche lorraine sat perched upon a plate beside a bottle of Sancerre that leaned against the basket and a pristine box tied neatly with a green ribbon. "You were mon bon garçon today, so for dessert, I have made Earl Grey macarons."

Arthur groaned, heat flooding his cheeks as he kicked his shoes and socks off. "Don't call me that," He snapped, shooting Francis an incredulous look. "I'm nearly two thousand years old, for Christ's sake. I'm hardly a boy, git."

That earned him another bout of giggles as Francis uncorked the Sancerre, the soft pop echoing across the quiet beach. "Oui, I know that well, mon amour. That wild little boy I once knew...he has grown into a fine man indeed." Francis hummed as he poured the pale wine into crystal glasses, handing one to Arthur with an easy smile. "Santé, mon bon monsieur," He teased with a wink, raising his glass in a small toast before taking a sip.

Arthur accepted both the glass and compliment, raising it in answer and imbibing. Crisp vintage spilled over his tongue, tasting the way the sea smelled on a clear morning, as if Francis had somehow bottled the very essence of this coastline. "I can't say wine is my favourite drink. But...I dare say, you've chosen well with this one," He admitted, swirling his glass and watching the pale gold liquid spiral.

"Mmm. Sancerre always reminds me of Pas-de-Calais," Francis confessed, his gaze returning to the lapping waves and cliffs in the distance. "I had a glass of it before coming to see you that day."

When Arthur looked at him with a thick eyebrow raised in confusion, Francis tilted his head and a sparkle gleamed in his eye. "Do you remember the Chunnel opening? 1994?"

It took a moment for the memory to properly sink in but when it did, Arthur's lips quickly turned into a scowl. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Don't remind me of that nonsense."

"Hahaha! But it was so sweet," Francis grinned. "It was like a story, mon amour. Both of us, so eager to surprise the other, taking the very first passenger trains..."

"...Only to arrive at empty houses like a pair of idiots," Arthur finished, shaking his head dismissively, scarcely able to suppress his own smile at the memory.

"I thought I was being so clever. The tunnel had just opened, and I thought - what a romantic gesture! I'll surprise my handsome Englishman by taking the very first passenger service I could book."

"Yes, yes. And I had the exact same brilliant idea. Spent the entire journey from Dover planning what I'd say when I knocked on your door," Arthur said dryly.

"When you called me, I had so many complaints prepared but- hahaha oh! It all went out the window so fast when I heard of your plight, mon chéri," Francis snickered as he lay down and rested his now empty glass on the blanket, one arm behind his head while the other plucked a macaron from the box.

The picture of peace, he was with crumbs now on his lips. This man bore little resemblance to the Francis who had stormed out of their shared colonial home on the edge of the Northern wilderness in the Americas nearly three centuries ago during the brief Anglo-French alliance.

Out of the millennia he had lived before or the centuries he had lived since, nothing could compare to the peace that came after they'd given up the pretense of having separate bedrooms; when Matthew's half-silent breaths mingled with Alfred's rumbling snores, as Francis burrowed deep into his arms.

"Back in the Americas...you told me that you loved me," Arthur reminisced on the memory of a younger Francis illuminated by the firelight, affections slipping from his lips with an ease that had caused Arthur to clam up instinctively. "I didn't say it back. I'm sor-

Francis cut him off again before he could finish the words. "Chut. You do not need to give me any apologies, Arthur. You have given enough of them to me. Save your sorries for those that still deserve them."

In the sunlight, Francis looked resplendent. His head was haloed by the sun, its rays tangled in the loose gold of his hair until Arthur couldn't tell where the warmth of the star ended and Francis began.

"Forgive me. It's hard to get used to...this." Arthur motioned vaguely between them at the perfect yet impossible domesticity of it all. "You and I. Sitting here like a pair of normal people having a picnic. When I think about what we've done to each other-

"Oui," Francis agreed as his lips tightened. "We have not always been gentle with one another, have we?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"How many times, do you think?" Arthur asked, without clarifying.

Francis exhaled slowly. "I stopped counting after the siege of Orléans."

"I didn't," Arthur admitted, his mouth twisting. "I kept a tally for a while. In the margins of a ledger, like it was revenue owed. As though there was a number that would balance the account." He shook his head. "There wasn't."

"Non," Francis agreed quietly. "There never could be."

By the end of it, they had known the precise sound the other made when steel found lung. The exact expression each wore when the light left their eyes.

"The last time was Waterloo," Francis offered, as if reading his thoughts. "1815. After that..."

"After that, we stopped."

"We stopped," Francis echoed as a faint, wondering smile touched his lips. His hand inched across the blanket to cover Arthur's, who found himself entwining their fingers, gripping onto them tight. With a sigh, Francis shifted closer and rested his head on Arthur's bony shoulder.

They sat like that for a while - warm weight against him, the Sancerre nearly finished, the afternoon glistening off the rolling waves of the tide.

"If only that wild little boy in the peristylum could have seen you now," Francis murmured as his head turned, nose burying into the crook of Arthur's neck. "I still remember it all. The way the air smelt, how the grass stained, the sweetness of the figs." His voice dropped to a whisper against Arthur's skin, barely audible, eliciting goosebumps with the very sentence that had been engraved into his heart ever since their lips had met for the first time. "Je penserai à toi pour toujours, Britannia."

Arthur closed his eyes and let the truth of all these years wash over him, a final recognition of that something once unnameable that had filled the hollow cavern of his chest from the moment that he'd laid eyes on Galia. He had known it through a hundred and sixteen years of war, through every blade and every battlefield, no matter how desperately he hoped that spilling Francis' blood could somehow wash his heart clean of the love that stubbornly lingered. He had known it in the domestic warmth of the colonial kitchen, stepping indoors from the garden with dirt on his hands to hear Francis' melodic voice singing ditties to their children as he baked. He had known it at Waterloo when the killing finally stopped, in the trenches when they clung to one another in terror as shells screamed overhead, on the Chunnel uninvited with a bouquet in his hands and unpracticed words muddled in his head. Two millennia of stubbornness. Two millennia of wars and treaties and oceans crossed and uncrossed, of brothers wounded, of nations burned, of words bitten back and chances squandered.

The velvet box was still warm in his pocket, impossibly heavy as Arthur thought: enough. *Enough wasted years. Enough silence.*

"Come with me," Arthur spoke before he had even fully formed the thought in his mind. Finishing the remaining wine in his glass with one swig, he settled it into the sand, before disentangling their hands with a parting squeeze and standing.

Francis blinked up at him, wine glass still loosely cradled in his fingers with an eyebrow raised curiously. "Quoi?"

"The water. Just come with me," Arthur answered, voice as taut as a bowstring as he held out his hand. "Just- trust me. Please."

Something about his request cut through Francis' bemusement because the teasing retort that had already begun to form on his lips dissolved into silence. Setting his glass down upon the blanket, he took Arthur's hand and rose.

They crossed the sand without speaking, bare feet pressing crescents into the shore that the tide would later erase within minutes. When they reached the surf, Arthur's fingers gripped tight around Francis', as though loosening his grip might allow two thousand years of momentum to wash away alongside their footprints.

As the water reached their knees, Arthur stopped. He turned to face Francis.

Behind Francis, the chalk face of Cap Blanc-Nez rose pale and stark against the blindingly picturesque clear sky; the whole of France at his shoulders like the land itself had come to bear witness. And Arthur knew that he must have cut a mirror image - Dover's white cliffs ghosting the distant horizon at his own back, the two men framed by their nations yet standing in the narrow stretch of water that belonged to them both.

Shaking hands reached into his pocket, the box warm and small against his palm. He fumbled with the clasp once, twice - fingers trembling so violently that the surf nearly swallowed it whole - before it snapped open with a quiet click that cut clean through the crash of waves.

And then he knelt.

The Channel soaked through his trousers instantly, cold enough to make his teeth ache. His suit was ruined. But he couldn't have cared less. Not when Francis was standing above him with both hands pressed to his mouth, tears falling freely now, those ocean-blue eyes so wide and bright that Arthur could barely breathe for the sight of them.

"I'm not doing this as England," Arthur began, the nerves in his voice conversely evening out despite the freezing water drenching his suit. "This isn't an alliance or a treaty. I'm asking you this as Arthur. Just Arthur. The wild little boy who scratched your cheeks and pulled your hair and didn't have a single word for what he felt because no one had ever taught him what it meant." Francis made a sound behind his hands, inelegant but raw and real, and Arthur felt his own eyes burn.

"I should have said it at Tamworth, when you held the ribbon in your hands and asked me if I'd dreamed of the cypress trees too. I should have said it in the Americas, when you told me that you loved me by the firelight and I couldn't make the words come out. I should have said it a thousand times across a thousand years and the fact that I didn't will always be one of my greatest regrets."

The ring caught in the afternoon sun - a simple band of white gold cradling a single cabochon of blue john, its banded ribbons of deep violet and pale amber-gold swirling through one another. Derbyshire stone, English earth - a piece of his own land, his own heart, polished smooth and set low and prostrated openly before Francis.

"You asked me once, under cypress trees, whether I would think of you when I went back to my kingdom of mud and mist." He could taste the words that preceded their first kiss - the faint sweetness of stolen figs and the salt of shared tears - as he spoke them. "And Francis, I need you to know that my answer is the same. Of course I did. You're impossible to forget."

The surf tugged at his knees as salt stung his lips.

"Francis Bonnefoy," Arthur breathed, his heart stuttering to a stop within his chest. "Will you marry me?"

Francis' hands dropped from his mouth. For one terrible, suspended moment, he said nothing - standing in the shining water with tears streaming down his face and the whole of France at his back, and Arthur felt the channel sway beneath his knees as his strength ebbed away with each passing second.

Then, Francis laughed - a sound so full of joy that it burst at the seams. "Oui," Francis choked, tears and laughter tangling together until they were indistinguishable, delicately extending his hand out between them. "Oui, oui, oui - yes, you impossible, infuriating, beautiful man - yes."

Arthur's fingers trembled so badly that he nearly dropped the ring twice, the cabochon catching the light as it slid finally onto Francis' slender finger. A piece of England wrapped around France's hand. The sight of it blurred behind the tears that Arthur couldn't pretend weren't falling.

And then, before Arthur could rise, before he could even close the ring box, Francis' hands were on his face and he was being hauled upward out of the water and spun with a strength that belied those elegant hands. Water arced from their legs in bright ribbons, the Channel scattering into diamonds around them as the world wheeled - sky and chalk and sea and sun blurring into a single canvas of white and blue and gold. Arthur clung to Francis' shoulders and heard a sound tear from his own throat that he could scarcely recognize - too young, too free, too much like the laugh of a boy who had not yet learned to be wary of joy.

When they stilled, foreheads pressed together and breathing hard, Arthur saw them - not one Francis scattered along the path this time, but all of them. Every iteration layered into the man whose arms still held him above the surf. The lover, the diplomat, the soldier, the revolutionary, the corsair, the knight, the princess, and the boy; each one gazing back at him with the expression that Arthur had spent twenty centuries mistaking for condescension when it had always, always been something genuine.

And in those eyes for the first time he could see Francis seeing him in return. The administrator, the general, the father, the conqueror, the pirate, the king, the savage, and the boy. Every scar, every compromise, every terrible and tender thing that he had ever been, held without flinching in the blue of Francis' gaze.

It was more than just France seeing England, or England seeing France. It was Francis seeing Arthur and Arthur seeing Francis. The way that they should have seen one another across a sunlit garden two thousand years ago, when the boy with ribbons in his hair saw the boy with dirt smeared across his chin.

Francis' hand rose to his cheek, the white-gold metal of his ring warm against Arthur's skin as he traced the line of his jaw as though learning it for the first time.

"I love you, Arthur Kirkland," Francis whispered and the perpetual knot inside Arthur's heart finally unwound.

Arthur turned his head and pressed his lips to Francis' palm and whispered it back. "Je t'aime, Francis Bonnefoy."





ALMA AUSENTE

WRITTEN BY: HELIA

SATURDAY 13TH JANUARY, 1979

Arthur woke at the sordid, early hour of eleven o'clock. Something that he feared meant an old habit—that of rising with the sun—was trying to creep back into his routine. Never one to fall back asleep once awake, however, Arthur pulled himself from bed and figured that, as compensation for the slight he'd been dealt, he deserved a treat: breakfast *à la française*.

Donning but a well-loved robe (the once soft fabric now pilling and thin) and what little he had slept in, Arthur went to the kitchen, filled the kettle, and flicked it on. It would take a while to start. A second-hand job he'd acquired from his downstairs neighbour, the shopkeep. Technically also his next door neighbour, come to think of it, but... semantics.

While the kettle decided whether or not it wanted to boil, Arthur glimpsed at the calendar hanging up on the side of the fridge just to his right. Under today's date were three simple words: '*special guest arrives*'.

His heart leapt.

Not due to panic, mind. He hadn't forgotten. In fact, he was pretty well-prepared for his 'special guest': bed made with fresh sheets, towels folded, flat moderately clean (purely because that was how Arthur liked his environment, even if last night was spent in one of the grottiest clubs he'd come across so far). All that was really missing was a bit of food shopping. Speaking of which...

"Oh, dammit."

There was no milk in the fridge to go with his tea.

Hence he needed to go food shopping.

Arthur had all day, though. There was no rush. Company would arrive in the evening, and he could tolerate his tea without milk for now. *Old habits really are creeping up on you today, eh, Arthur?* Sure, he could have popped downstairs to the corner shop beneath him... But no, there was no rush. He was in no rush. Not this morning. Not today.

The plan was simple: lounge about, have a drink, have a smoke, freshen up, and find a way to kill time until about nine o'clock. And, well, do a food shop. Eventually.

Arthur promptly returned to the kettle so he could start brewing his first cup of the day. While he let his teabag sit and stew in its boiling bath, he wandered in turn towards the living room. His goal was the windowsill, across a shag-rug sea, upon which sat his current pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Along with his tea, that was breakfast—*à la française*—sorted.

Peering out across the street below his flat, Arthur pulled out a cigarette on the ready, his eyes focused on people walking and driving past. Every day life was right there, beating, in passing 'hello's and disgruntled horns, just on the other side of the glass. Every day life and mundanity, in all its brazen glory.

"And that's what it's all about..."

He lit his cigarette and made a start on that breakfast of his. That first plume of smoky haze he breathed out was a pleasant, comforting scent, though he did almost immediately crack the window open afterwards. A bit of fresh air never hur—

The intercom buzzed its violent buzz and Arthur nearly lost his cigarette to the floor. He caught his nerve. He cursed under his breath. Who the hell was calling at this time? He wasn't expecting any post, nor any visitors (not yet!). He contemplated someone doing it at random—young teens pulling pranks, buzzing bells, running off. *Unlikely*. What if it was more sinister than that? What if there was a man (or men) in a suit (or suits) waiting outside...? He had often wondered if, one day...

Arthur went to the phone by his front door. He hesitated for a moment, reserved, chancing another quick drag of cheap cigarette before taking ivory plastic in hand and bringing it to his ear.

"Buzz off," he said instantly, deadpan. "Unless you're the postie, in which case: mornin' Frank."

"...Arthur?"

It was a man. Definitely a man. The suit was harder to establish, though he didn't exactly sound loc—

"It's Toni."

The blond blinked, gaze fixed like glue to the wall he stood opposite. "Toni?" he repeated.

"Antonio," the voice on the other end of the line clarified. "I'm a bit early."

"A *bit*?" Arthur returned, his face having morphed into one of bewilderment and panic, almost, as he thought about his empty fridge. "I thought your flight was at five in the afternoon, not in the morning!"

"It— Well, it was," Antonio said to him. "It *is*, I mean."

"...so how come you're here?"

"Kind of a long story, to be honest," the other said with a sigh, although evidently not a long enough story to prevent him from sharing it: "Last night, I was struggling to sleep and realised I just couldn't bear the thought of waiting around the airport for hours on end to finally leave. So when I saw there was a morning flight, I... decided to get on it. I hope that's not an issue. I— I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, no," he assured him, even though it felt as though he might as well have. "I'll be down in a minute, 'ang on."

He didn't wait for a reply before putting the phone back and cursing again—this time at himself.

Although it had been a knee-jerk initial reaction, Arthur recognised at that moment that it had been a little dramatic. A little misplaced. He leaned against his wall and returned briefly to his cigarette, needing a few seconds to gather himself, before his heart beat once more and he marched towards the entryway table and bowl his keys lay in. He retrieved them, giving them a jingle, and he was straight out of the door, cigarette hanging between his lips.

As he scurried down the stairs, a slight hurry to his step, Arthur reminded himself why Antonio was in London at all. He reminded himself, too, why those reasons might mean Antonio would not want to linger in Madrid, and why he would want to catch an earlier flight. And then he also reminded himself of Antonio's pride, and why he would not *confess* such reasons openly, even if Arthur knew what they were.

A complicated time, that's what it was. Arthur could only hope this idea of his would actually work...

Key went into lock and he twisted it around until he heard that old clack, before he opened the door, pulled his cigarette out of his mouth, and greeted his guest with as nice a smile as he could manage.

"Welcome to London!"

"...you're in your underwear."

"Awe, come off it. Didn't take you for a prude," Arthur joked, though he acknowledged that perhaps standing in the doorway in just a bathrobe and pair of boxers was not entirely the norm. Still, he peered at what luggage Antonio had brought with him—a single suitcase and a bag he carried, and said, "That it?"

"What?"

"Bags."

"Yes. Why?"

"Jus' not much," Arthur observed.

"I'm only here for two weeks," Antonio reminded him.

Arthur, however, begged to differ. Two weeks was their original arrangement, but he knew that could change. He knew that it might *have* to. Two weeks was not a long time—not in the grand scheme of things. But, right now, that was not important.

Not willing to shy away from his hosting duties so early on in the game, Arthur relocated his cigarette once more and took custody of Antonio's suitcase. It was heavier than expected, admittedly, and it was certainly an effort to lug back up a narrow staircase (though he refused Antonio's offers to help), but he managed.

When they eventually arrived at Arthur's apartment, he abandoned the suitcase by the front door, plopped his dying cigarette in an ashtray on the entryway table, and duly informed his Spanish guest that he was just in time for tea.

"Not got coffee," he lamented. Another item for his food shop. "Can't stand the stuff personally, but we can get you some later."

"Tea's fine," claimed Antonio, though, to the other's surprise. "I can—I can do tea."

That tickled the Brit's humour as he walked across to his small kitchen. "Since when?" he quizzed. From the cupboard above the kettle, he pulled down his tin of teabags ready to remake his own drink, but in the meantime: "You don't have to be polite, you know," Arthur remarked. "I can do beer, vodka... Even got some rum, I'm pretty sure, in the—" "Tea's fine," his guest insisted, nevertheless. "Really."

He stood by his suitcase, complacent, docile. Stood as still as a statue, in fact, as though he required permission to move around freely. Arthur knew why. He understood why. So he conceded the fight, this time, and agreed: tea was fine.

As he pulled a second cup down and placed it next to his, however, a single thought niggled at the back of his brain. The thought that, hopefully, all of *that* would soon change.

Fishnets, leather, boots, spikes. Antonio's eyes dragged slowly over the details of his reflection in the bedroom mirror, taking in all of these things yet to feel familiar to him. Yet to feel comfortable.

As he looked, he had to keep shaking the thought out of his head that, *this isn't right, this is not the way to be*. It was invasive—a habit he needed to break. His fingers brushed over the criss-crossing, black nylon that spread up his legs, until they met frayed denim and came to pockets they could hide in for a while. Antonio took a deep breath. He turned to the side, assessing his profile, then returned to the front. His face was flat, much like his mood.

"How are you—? Oh, nice. How's it feel?" Arthur asked, leaning against the doorframe. He, too, had taken some time to change that evening, and now they both donned similarly dark outfits—a joint statement, albeit one Antonio was unsure of.

The Spaniard looked at him, but couldn't find a word to describe how it felt. So he turned back again to his reflection, as if the answer would be there in the glass.

Spoiler: it wasn't!

"Not sure?" the other wondered and wandered into the room. Antonio could see him in the mirror, lingering over his shoulder, a pensive expression on his face. "You brought all of this with you, right?"

"Yeah, it's— it's all mine," Antonio told him. "It just doesn't... *feel* it...?"

Arthur hummed. "Like something's missing?" he probed. "Or like it's all wrong?"

"More like something's missing, I think," he decided with another inspection of his reflection.

Everything that was there was something he needed—something that fit, something that belonged to this piece of him that had grown in the shadows for the last forty years. A breaking habit. A minor fracture. But it just wasn't *right*.

Antonio closed his eyes and tried to think of Madrid. He tried to think about the people he'd met, those special people he had started to walk amongst and pass nights with. Fishnets, leather, boots, spikes, *more*.

He took another breath, then turned again to Arthur. This time, it was the Brit he assessed—who he looked up and down and picked apart in his mind.

Arthur wore more. More layers, more things. A thick jacket, torn mesh, ripped jeans, chunky collar. Around his eyes, he'd smudged black eyeliner, green irises popping through the smoke. His hair still needed styling, he claimed, perhaps feeling the pressure of intense peer scrutiny.

"I like your hair," Antonio observed, however. It was shaggy, rough-cut, loose. A natural ruggedness to it, but the other evidently wanted a bit more edge, which... fair enough.

The fashion was similar on both sides of the water, that much he'd noticed, but Antonio valued the androgyny seen in Madrid.

Non-conformity. That was the whole point: the bold statement of dressing in a way that went against the established norm, against the dreary, gloomy life that had solidified itself in Spain. A regime that had drained all colour and life out of the country, including the personification himself...

Antonio was like a ghost of who he once was. This was why he was in London. He needed that back. He needed himself back, but knew he needed to do so outside of his own borders. Outside of his comfort zone. He needed that life and—

"Colour..."

"...colour?" Arthur repeated quizzically.

He gave a nod, firm and growing quickly more and more sure of that spark. "I need colour," he said. "Something 'loud and proud', as you would say."

Arthur took a moment to think, and then his lips stretched into a one-sided smile. "I have just the thing."

There were many instances in all the centuries of knowing each other in which Arthur could place himself in that same position, leaning over and looking down at Antonio.

He could picture gardens. Cool, green grass, shielded from the rest of Hampton Court by tall bushes laden with white and red roses, was beneath them, like a verdant halo around the other's head. In the distance, he could hear the bustle and chatter of courtesans being entertained on the lawns, but it faded out of his mind as a hand felt his cheek and a Spaniard, interested only in one kind of England, smiled up at him.

Then he pictured a bed, old and dusty, bearing thick covers and the heavy scent of lilies and orange blossoms. Only candlelight kept them company. It was warm. The layers had been peeled away both literally and figuratively as they lay there together, in that sweet-scented warmth. The light flickered. Hands wandered. Arthur never wanted it to end. This was a sliver of heaven, right in his grasp, and he wished it—

The picture morphed again, and now he saw a wooden deck, old and stained and drenched by torrential rain. Antonio's eyes were brimming with pain and betrayal, slicing past the deadly blade of knife to meet his assailant's gaze. Yet, there was dare in them, too—as though he wanted to scream, *do it!* But the words were not there. Instead, the screams were of cannonfire and clashing men. Below Arthur was his prize. But this... This wasn't what he'd wanted. This wasn't what he'd *planned*. This— H-He still—!

His eyes looked upwards, but they did not seem to see. He was awake, that he knew, but Arthur feared it would not last. He held Antonio's hand and told him to power on, to hold out, to wait just a little longer. Just wait a little longer. *God, the blood*. A battlefield and rivers of blood. It was never-ending! The French were being pushed back and João would be there soon with help, but he just had to—!

Coarse sand. Gentle waves. A blanket, some wine, and two fake names, just for a weekend. Spain was beautiful. The new century was beautiful. Messy as all Hell, but a beastly kind of beautiful when in the company of someone else who also wanted to escape. Arthur carded his fingers through Antonio's hair and the other hummed a calm melody as they were both swept away into blissful oblivion—

"Do you really think this will help?"

Arthur blinked and returned to his bedroom, to the bed whose edge he perched upon, to the brunet below him who waited ardently for his response. Their past was left behind in a fading cloud, a selection of memories that would bury themselves once more. In one hand balanced a palette of eyeshadows and a brush yet to apply the first pop of colour that Antonio craved.

"Help with... what?" the blond questioned, switching back on his focus.

Antonio hesitated. His gaze averted for a fleeting moment, before he sucked in a breath and said, "With finding freedom. For people like *us*, I mean," he clarified. "After all these years—and I don't *only* mean recent ones—I just want to—"

"I don't know," Arthur replied in earnest. "I don't know what'll help you feel the freedom you *need*, but—"

"Then why am I—?"

"Ah! Gimme a chance," Arthur chided, albeit lightly, managing a feeble smile before he continued: "I don't know what'll help you, because I'm *not* you," he said. "But what I *do* know is that the first step to feeling *anything* better than you did before is to let go of your fears. No more complacency, no more doing as you're told. *Let go* of who you were before that plane landed at Heathrow and be... you. The 'you' we both know you *are*, deep down."

It was an instruction that Antonio seemed wary of. "You make it sound easy," he claimed.

Arthur, however, knew all too well that it was not.

Reinventing oneself was a task that required a lot of faith, a lot of patience, a lot of trial and error. It was a costly decision, to change and to try and be someone different to who you had been your entire life.

Another habit one had to force oneself to grow out of, no matter how much it hurt.

As Arthur looked down at Antonio, he recalled again those moments shared in their past. Those days as younger, carefree nations frolicking in royal gardens. The days as lovers navigating maturity and duty, to themselves and their people. The years of rivalry or hostility, drawing blood and causing pain that left only a bitter taste of regret the next day.

This, right here in Arthur's bedroom, felt like another flashpoint. A moment that could spark and once more change their trajectory. It was a chance to move on from the previous chapter they shared—a bleak one, all sordid treaties and forlorn looks across meeting rooms—and embark on a new journey. To start afresh.

Letting go of the past and all its iterations would be a challenge far greater than could be described. But if Arthur could help Antonio take those first steps, then that was what he wanted to do. Not for himself, but because *Antonio* wanted to. Because he had grown sick of the regimes. Because he wanted to wash away the past and be reborn in this enlightened age. Because he wanted to feel the sun on his face again.

"It won't be," he thus told the Spaniard. "Speaking from experience, it'll be one of the hardest things you do."

"...I fear that says a lot," the other mumbled warily.

"It sure does. But if you want help, of any kind," Arthur said, "then you have it. You just have to ask."

After a few seconds and loud heartbeats, a hand rose and held Arthur's cheek. He welcomed it and its warmth, and feeling its unsteadiness he placed his own hand on top. A promise of sorts. One that didn't need to be said. Neither did Antonio feel a need to speak, though. He smiled up at his host—one of gratitude and mirth, radiant in a way that rivaled the Sun—and with a breath, he took that first step:

"Red," he said, nodding at the eyeshadow palette. "I want red."

"Really?" Arthur remarked, intrigued. He smiled back at Antonio and tested: "I think purple might compliment your eyes better."

Antonio, however, did not relent. "*Red*, Kirkland," he insisted. "You're gonna paint me red in all the places I tell you to, and then, together, I say we paint this town. *If* you think you can handle it."

"Oh, I can handle it, sweetheart," Arthur assured him, pride and thrill flourishing as a grin as he readied his brush and his ego for the night that now lay ahead of them. "And I know you can, too."



A TIMELINE OF THE LONGEST SATURDAY IN LUDWIG'S LIFE

WRITTEN BY: ROSHON NYHNE

8:44 AM

On what would have otherwise been a perfectly normal Saturday, Ludwig Beilschmidt woke up late.

He had a vague memory of waking up to his 5:00 alarm and hitting snooze, but looking at the time on his lock screen, he's obviously far overslept the nine minute snooze period on his phone. Things were off to a great start. Usually Ludwig liked to start his weekends with an early morning job. The narrow rowhouse he shared with his brother and his brother's husband could get a bit crowded on Saturdays with all three of them at home, although the graduate student was nonetheless grateful that there had been no hesitation in Gilbert's words when he'd offered Ludwig the spare bedroom of the pre-war historical townhouse.

Well, "spare bedroom" was probably a rather generous way of putting it. What Ludwig was really living in was the basement with only the barest hint of natural light filtering in and the world's noisiest dryer sharing a wall. Gilbert's composer husband, Roderich, always looked a bit apologetic when he came down to the basement to do laundry, but Gilbert, who had long ago gotten over such niceties, had no issue with stomping down the stairs to start a load of wash at any time of day.

But it wasn't laundry that had disturbed Ludwig's slumber that morning. What had kept him tossing and turning the entire night was that in approximately ten hours, his boyfriend would be coming over for dinner, Ludwig was hoping against all odds that his brother would just be Normal about it.

Fat chance.

Ludwig's "coming out" conversation with his older brother hadn't gone terribly by any means (Gilbert was married to a man himself, after all) but it seemed that no matter how old they were, Gilbert delighted in nothing more than embarrassing the hell out of Ludwig. He'd already been dating Feliciano for a few months by the time he finally told his family that he was seeing someone, and that he was gay.

Gilbert had responded by laughing so hard he devolved into a coughing fit through which he managed to call Roderich and tell him that "Luddy just told me that water's wet!"

And so, groggy and sorely in need of some caffeine, Ludwig managed to climb the stairs to the main floor just as his brother was returning to the kitchen with an empty mug in hand, looking far, far too chipper for Ludwig's current emotional bandwidth.

"Well, well, look who's finally awake, *Dornröschen!* Roddy and I had bets going on when you would get up. You're starting to soften up in your old age."

At his name, Gilbert's husband entered the kitchen after him, looking just as groggy as Ludwig felt, although for the world renowned composer the late morning hour wasn't entirely abnormal. Ludwig still wasn't sure how Gilbert and Roderich made their opposing sleep schedules work, but he supposed that between the three of them it gave his brother ample opportunity to gloat about being the early bird getting the worm.

"Gilbert was making bets on when you would get up," the brunet clarified, side stepping his husband's attempt at a kiss entirely to get to the Keurig machine and set his empty mug under the dispenser.

"Hey, I was going to use that!" Gilbert protested, waving his favorite bird-Godzilla mug.

Roderich didn't so much as glance in his husband's direction. "This is only my second cup of the day, and you are already on your third. Some of us need the caffeine more," he retorted.

Unfortunately for Ludwig, he had a feeling that his first cup of coffee that morning wouldn't be coming any time soon.

1:10 PM

im so excited to meet ur family tonight!! should i stop and get some wine?

or cannoli?? Lovi was just teling me abt a rly good italian restaurant in dupont that didnt make him mad we should go sometime should i bring red or white wine? ill get the cannoli just in case!

Ludwig switched off the vacuum to dig out his phone from the five successive buzzes he'd felt in his back pocket. Feliciano Vargas texted like he talked, and it was one of the many things about the American-born Italian that Ludwig found rather endearing, if not a bit overwhelming.

For most of the morning he'd been working to get the house cleaned up for dinner that night, tidying messes and folding the laundry lest his first ever boyfriend think him a slob. To be frank, there really wasn't much to clean up, given that his older brother kept a rather immaculate household despite his personality suggesting otherwise

(and to the chagrin of Roderich, who was very much not of the same mindset of the Beilschmidt brothers and found their neurotic need for cleanliness and order altogether exasperating).

But somehow he'd managed to keep his nerves at bay for the last several hours and as he looked around from the spot he was vacuuming, he realized that, in truth, there was nothing else to clean. And right on cue, the anxiety came flooding back in.

"Um..." he said aloud, staring at Feliciano's texts on the screen. Feeling like his heart was inching increasingly closer to his throat, he quickly shoved his phone back into his pants pocket, too overwhelmed to even think of a response to his boyfriend's barrage of questions. And then, feeling immediately guilty, he grabbed it again and managed to type out, **Red would be good. Don't feel like you need to bring a dessert. The restaurant your brother recommended sounds nice.**

He then stowed the vacuum cleaner and looked around desperately for something to occupy himself with. There was a stack of music compositions on the dining room table from Roderich's breakfast review routine so he scooped them up and climbed the stairs to the upper floor and the musician's at-home office.

"Arthur, I really think that you are missing the point. The opera isn't supposed to be witty, it's an opera about Herbert Hoover, for God's sakes, it's not a goddamn Gilbert and Sullivan— one moment. Yes?"

Ludwig cracked the door open and peeked inside sheepishly, holding up the sheets of music. "Um, these were on the dining room table..."

Roderich made a tiresome noise. "Sometimes it's like living with two very well-trained, neurotic golden retrievers," he sighed, walking over to take the music.

Ludwig let the other return to his call and made his way back down the stairs to the now very clean, very organized living room. It was barely 1:15. Now what?

6:03 PM

Ludwig had run out of hair product and he was trying to not have a panic about it. He could have sworn there was still a few swipes' worth in the tin the day before, but the container on the bathroom counter was clearly empty.

It was already past 6:00 and Feliciano was due at 6:30, which meant that by any respectable German's standards, Ludwig was running behind. Praying to whatever god deigned to hear him, Ludwig hastily wrapped a towel around his waist and marched up the basement stairs, intent on confronting his brother for using his stuff without telling him. Both Gilbert and Roderich were in the kitchen, attending to the dinner simmering away on the stove.

"Gilbert, I told you to ask first before using my pomade," he broke into it immediately, still holding up his towel with one hand. His brother leaned around Roderich to regard Ludwig with unhurried ease.

"Pomade?"

"My hair products," Ludwig clarified, starting to feel a little ridiculous now that he was standing in the kitchen in nothing but a bath towel. Roderich cleared his throat and turned to Ludwig with an apologetic look. "Ah...that was actually me who used your hair product, Ludwig. I should have told you sooner, I apologize."

Ludwig gaped at his brother's husband, unsure of where his jurisdiction lay in admonishing the other for using up his hair clay. In response, Gilbert just threw his head back in a laugh.

"Ha! The little master was too cheap to get his own hair products so he just kleptoed them from my under-funded graduate student brother— go figure!"

Ludwig, redfaced, turned around quickly and retreated back down the stairs.

"It'll be great, Luddy, don't worry so much!" his brother shouted after him.

6:30 PM

Ludwig checked his watch a third time as he peered out the living room window. Still no sign of his boyfriend.

"Italian, you said, huh?" Gilbert slung an arm across his shoulder, his sibling making sure to lean all of his body weight on Ludwig with the pure intention of being obnoxious.

"He was born in New Jersey."

"Jersey?" Gilbert immediately stepped back, wrinkling his nose. "Whoa, I might have to take back my blessings on this relationship."

"Gil!"

"Aw, c'mon, Lutz, I'm just messin' with you. Half the guys on my crew are from Dirty Jersey, DC attracts 'em like flies." He reached up and ruffled Ludwig's immaculately styled hair, which had taken extra long since he'd had to borrow Gilbert's stuff, and Ludwig immediately stiffened, throwing daggers his sibling's way before marching stiffly back downstairs to redo it a third time.

6:43 PM

"Have you heard any word from him?" Roderich asked while Ludwig paced in front of the window.

"I sent him a message, but I do not want to distract him too much while he is driving."

"Italian!" Gilbert called from the kitchen.

6:49 PM

A bright red Fiat screeched into the driveway and a moment later, a series of rapid knocks came at the door. Ludwig made to get to the door first, but to his astonishment (and annoyance), Gilbert managed to beat him there, shooting Ludwig a victorious smirk before pulling open the heavy oak entryway.

"Luuudwiiiiiggg I'm so sorry I'm late I made a wrong turn driving here and ended up going around the entire National Mall and then there was a motorcade for someone important I don't know who I don't think it was the President because it was kinda short but it must have been for someone important because it still took a while and then I had to wait in traffic to cross the bridge and then I was accidentally holding up traffic and people were honking at me and— Oh, hello, I'm Feliciano!"

Gilbert was leaning against the door, something between a laugh and a smirk dancing on his lips as he listened to Feliciano prattle on. Ludwig resisted the urge to hide his face behind his hands.

"Feliciano! Great to finally meet ya! I'm Gilbert, Ludwig's older, and better, brother." He stuck his hand out and Feliciano took it with enthusiasm, nearly bouncing on the balls of his feet at the threshold.

"Wow, Luddy's told me so much about you, Gilbert! It's so nice to finally meet you. I'm sorry for being so late Ludwig told me to leave extra early just in case and I tried to but the traffic in DC is so terrible— Oh, I forgot the wine and the cannoli in the car!"

"I'll go get them," Ludwig cut in quickly before his boyfriend broke something running back to his vehicle.

"Hi, Ludwig!" Having finally noticed his boyfriend hovering awkwardly to the side, Feliciano beamed and launched himself towards the blond like an excited puppy, leaning all the way up on his tippy toes to give him a kiss. Ludwig immediately lit up firehouse red.

"Um, why don't you get yourself settled inside and I'll go get the things from the car," he offered, managing to collect the keys from Feliciano just as Roderich entered the foyer and began to introduce himself.

He took a deep breath to himself as he stepped outside, repeating the mantra to himself that Everything Was Going Great. When he returned, Feliciano was still in rapt conversation with Gilbert and Roderich, his boyfriend very much looking like a newly adopted puppy that was just so excited to get to meet new people.

"Luddy! Luddy! Did you know that Roderich is writing an opera? Opera originated in Italy, you know, and my big brother actually trained to sing opera for a while before he got involved with the embassy— oh yay, you got the wine and the cannoli, I got them at a restaurant in DuPont that my brother Lovi said has actually decent Italian food for DC we'll all have to go there sometime!"

"Cannolis, huh?" Gilbert plucked the bag out of the Ludwig's hands and held it up to his face with an overly discerning eye.

"Wait until dessert, you fool," Roderich smacked at Gilbert's hand, his sibling grumbling in response but lowering the takeout bag nonetheless.

"Well, kids, shall we get this dinner started?" he then swept his free hand out, to which Feliciano cheered.

"Yay I'm sooo hungry!"

7:21 PM

For not the first time that day, Ludwig found himself weighing the legal and moral consequences of fratricide.

Dinner was going okay by some definition of the word, but Ludwig was certain that he'd have a stress headache later and his hands were beginning to get sore from how tightly they were gripping his silverware as he tried to cut into his steak in the most casual, normal way he could manage.

In the past twenty minutes since they'd finally sat down, Gilbert had tried no fewer than seven times to bring up the most embarrassing stories he had in his arsenal about Ludwig's childhood. Thankfully, between himself and Roderich, they'd managed to keep his older sibling (mostly) in line, and Ludwig knew that the other's shins were starting to hurt from Roderich kicking him under the table by the way Gilbert had been subtly scooting his chair further from the musician the entire night.

"Wow, Ludwig, your brother and Roderich are so cool, you're so lucky you get to live with family. I mean I live with my big brother too, but he's always so busy at the embassy and our parents are all the way up in Bayonne and actually I was mostly raised by my Nonno and he moved back to Rome in 2010—"

"Yeah, Little Luddy here is lucky he gets to live with the awesome me and my hot husband," Gilbert snickered, having mostly gathered by that point that the best way to get a word in with Feliciano was to simply interrupt him.

His brother tried to reach over and mess up his hair (again) but this time Ludwig managed to duck out of the way, cutting into his steak with even more furious concentration.

7:46 PM

"Wow, that was so good, you and Roderich are really good cooks, Mr. Beilschmidt!"

Ludwig gave a small, mostly internal, sigh of relief. Dinner was finally over. Roderich had already begun collecting plates and Ludwig stood to help his brother-in-law, glad to stretch his legs after his stressed postures the entire evening.

"Aw, c'mon, kid, just call me 'Gilbert' or you'll make me feel old."

"Okay!"

He left his sibling and boyfriend to their chatter as he began scraping refuse in to the trash and piling plates into the sink. Roderich joined him in the kitchen a moment later.

"He's wonderful," he said quietly, almost startling Ludwig out of his blissful moment of quiet.

"Beg pardon?" he blinked.

"Feliciano," Roderich said, "I said that he's wonderful."

"Oh," Ludwig could feel his cheeks flush and he quickly looked down to focus on rinsing out dishes. "Um, thank you, Roderich, it, um, it means a lot to me that you and Gilbert seem to like him so much. Thank you for agreeing to have him over for dinner."

"You don't need to thank us," the musician chuckled. "Your brother was practically tripping over himself to meet him. He's just happy that you are happy, you know."

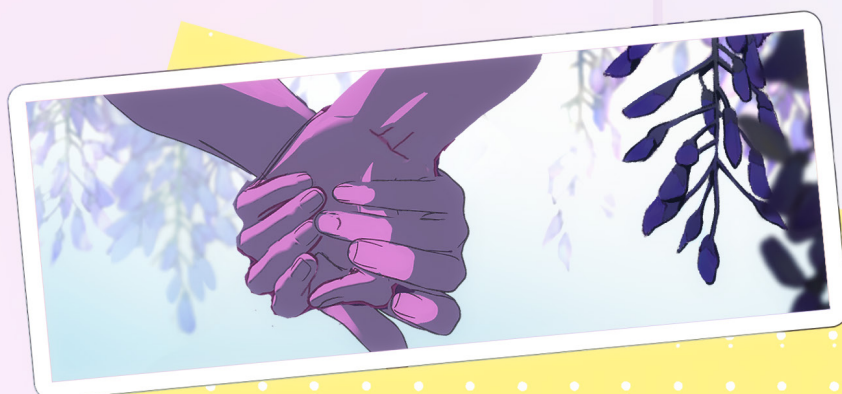
Ludwig didn't quite know what to say in response but Roderich simply patted his shoulder and went back out to the dining room to collect more dishes. He finished rinsing off the plates and adding them to the dishwasher before heading back himself, returning just as Gilbert seemed to be in the middle of showing off the Pinky Pie sticker on his construction hardhat along with its other assorted My Little Pony fan merch.

Next to him, Roderich was rolling his eyes with well-practiced affection and Feliciano was responding with equal enthusiasm about how cute the stickers were. Feliciano's cheeks were slightly flushed—either from exertion or the red wine they'd drunk with dinner—and in the chandelier lighting Ludwig could've sworn that his boyfriend's eyes were literally sparkling.

Both his brother and his boyfriend were talking way too loud and the pile of cannoli Feliciano had brought looked large enough to feed an army. But as Ludwig stood there, taking in the scene of his boyfriend's first meeting with his family, it somehow didn't feel like the first time at all.

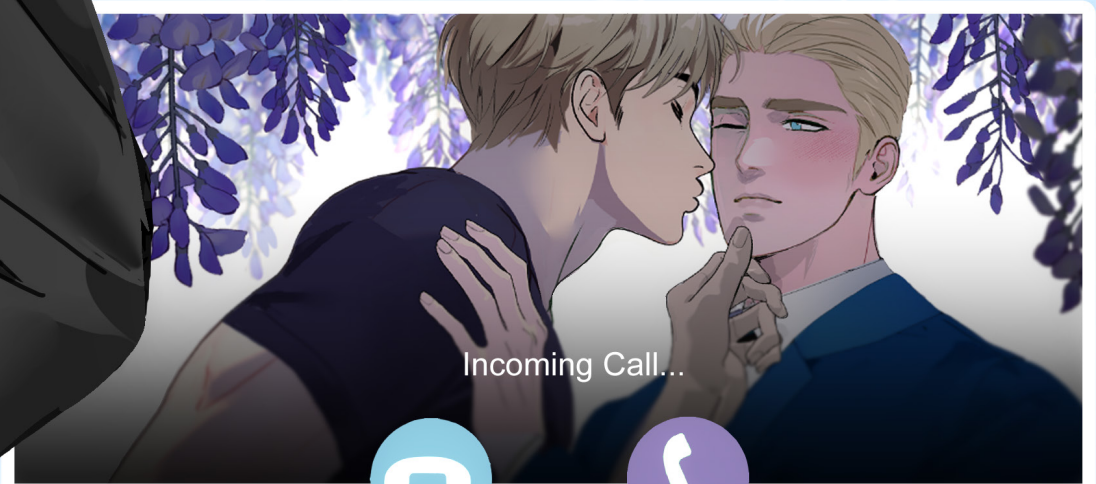
It felt like Feliciano had always been there, full-heartedly embracing and adding to the chaos and warmth of his messy, silly family. Everything Was Going Great.

And truly, it was.

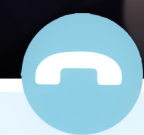


HAVE WE MET?

999



Incoming Call...



Ich liebe..



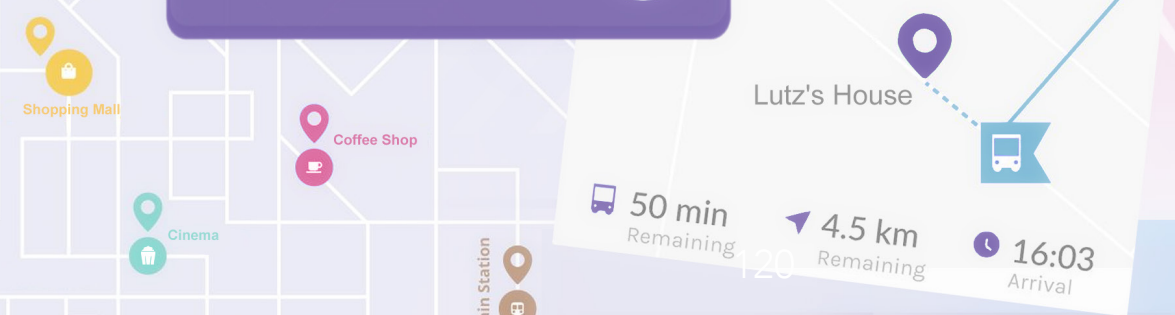
Set the date?

Date
08/17/2023

Accept

Decline

To Lutz's House? →

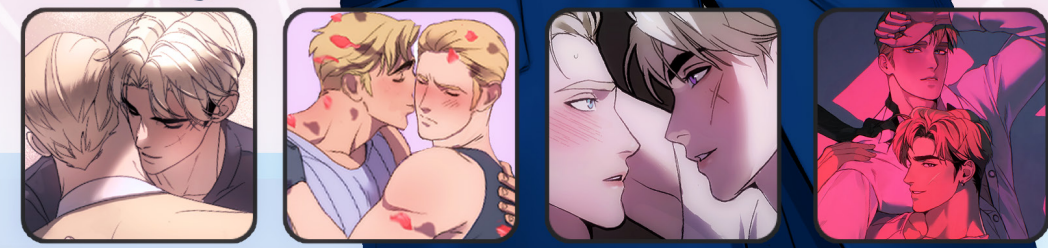


Lutz's House

50 min
Remaining

4.5 km
Remaining

16:03
Arrival



How are you?

I was just thinking about you.

You look... familiar.



NIGHT AT THE COUNTY FAIR

SPECIAL SHORT STORY WRITTEN BY: VINSMOKE-LOVER

Alfred walked through the midway, one hand holding his boyfriend's, the other in his pocket, fingers curled around a small black box. The sounds of laughter and screaming, and the scent of popcorn and funnel cakes filled the air. It was a warm summer evening, and there was still time left before night truly fell.

"The sunset is beautiful," Ludwig remarked. Alfred glanced towards the western sky, at the shades of pink and purple that adorned the clouds. "Ain't as beautiful as y'all, Sweet Potato," he responded, though, he had to admit, the sky was the last thing on his mind. He gazed up at the ferris wheel, and his heart started racing. He gripped the box tighter. Tonight.

The first ride that drew Alfred's attention away from the box in his pocket was a "spin and puke" ride called the Tango. "Hey, Sweet Potato!" he laughed, "Remember when I took y'all dancin' at the honky tonk?"

Ludwig was embarrassed. "Don't remind me, bitte," he groaned. Alfred laughed again. "But y'all were such a great dancer! Until I actually dragged ya onto the dance floor."

"I don't remember dancing before you did that."

"Exactly!" Alfred laughed.

The German elbowed his boyfriend. "Arschloch."

Alfred turned and gave him a shit eating grin. "You know you love me," he teased.

"Ja, ja," Ludwig sighed, "Ich liebe dich."

Alfred's face fell as he eyed the large black funnel cloud painted on another spinning ride: the Twister.

"Gibt es etwas los, Schatz?" Ludwig asked.

"Naw, nothin's wrong. I just hate those things."

"I remember you mentioning how you avoid 'Tornado Alley' -"

"Like the plague, yeah. I still remember when our date was ruined by one of 'em."

Ludwig squeezed his boyfriend's hand. "It wasn't so bad. I was still able to spend time with you."

"Barely!" Alfred's shoulders slumped. "I was too dizzy an' outta breath an' busy tryin' ta make sure ev'ryone around us was safe to pay much attention to y'all at all!"

Ludwig elbowed the American again, and drew his attention to the bumper cars. "Hey, look! Atlanta traffic, the fair ride!"

Alfred snorted. "Yeah, like Berlin's traffic's any better!" he exclaimed, feigning offense.

"It is, because people in my country actually know how to drive," Ludwig laughed.

Alfred scoffed. As the evening drew longer, he felt the box in his pocket consume his thoughts. His mind raced through different scenarios, very quickly jumping to the worst case. He tried to force the thoughts from his head, looking around for something else to give his attention to. His eyes finally landed on a tall, wide building: the Fun House.

"Hey, Sweet Potato, remember England's haunted house a couple Halloweens ago?" Alfred laughed, "That was fun, wasn't it?"

"Especially when you ran away scared after seeing the first obviously fake ghost," Ludwig chuckled.

.” huffed, stopping in his tracks, “That ghost was real, and y’all know it!”

“Sure, it was.”

“It was! But, even with a real ghost, his haunted house still wasn’t better than mine!”

Ludwig smirked. “Not even with the medieval torture wheel?” he asked.

“Not even with the medieval torture wheel,” the American replied, “An’ speakin’ of wheels,” he looked up at the Ferris Wheel, “We had our first kiss up there,” Alfred sighed, gripping the box in his pocket hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

Ludwig smiled and held his boyfriend’s hand tighter. “We did. On our first date.”

Alfred felt his heart rate rise as the ride slowly lifted them into the air, pausing at the top of the ride. The flood lights were too bright to see the stars, but Ludwig’s eyes still seemed to shine.

“Sweet Potato?” Alfred grabbed his boyfriend’s attention before nervously starting to ramble, “Tonight is the anniversary of our first date, and we’re at the same county fair where we had our first date, so now, on top of the same ferris wheel where we had our first kiss, I have to ask y’all, and I even asked Australia how to ask it in y’all’s language,” Ludwig bit back a chuckle at the American calling Austria the wrong name for the umpteenth time. Alfred slid the box out of his pocket and opened it to reveal a beautiful ring. He took a deep breath and looked the German in the eye.

Summoning all of his courage, he asked, “Willst du mich heiraten?”

Ludwig pulled him closer and kissed him. “Ja. Natürlich.”

“Did I say that right?”

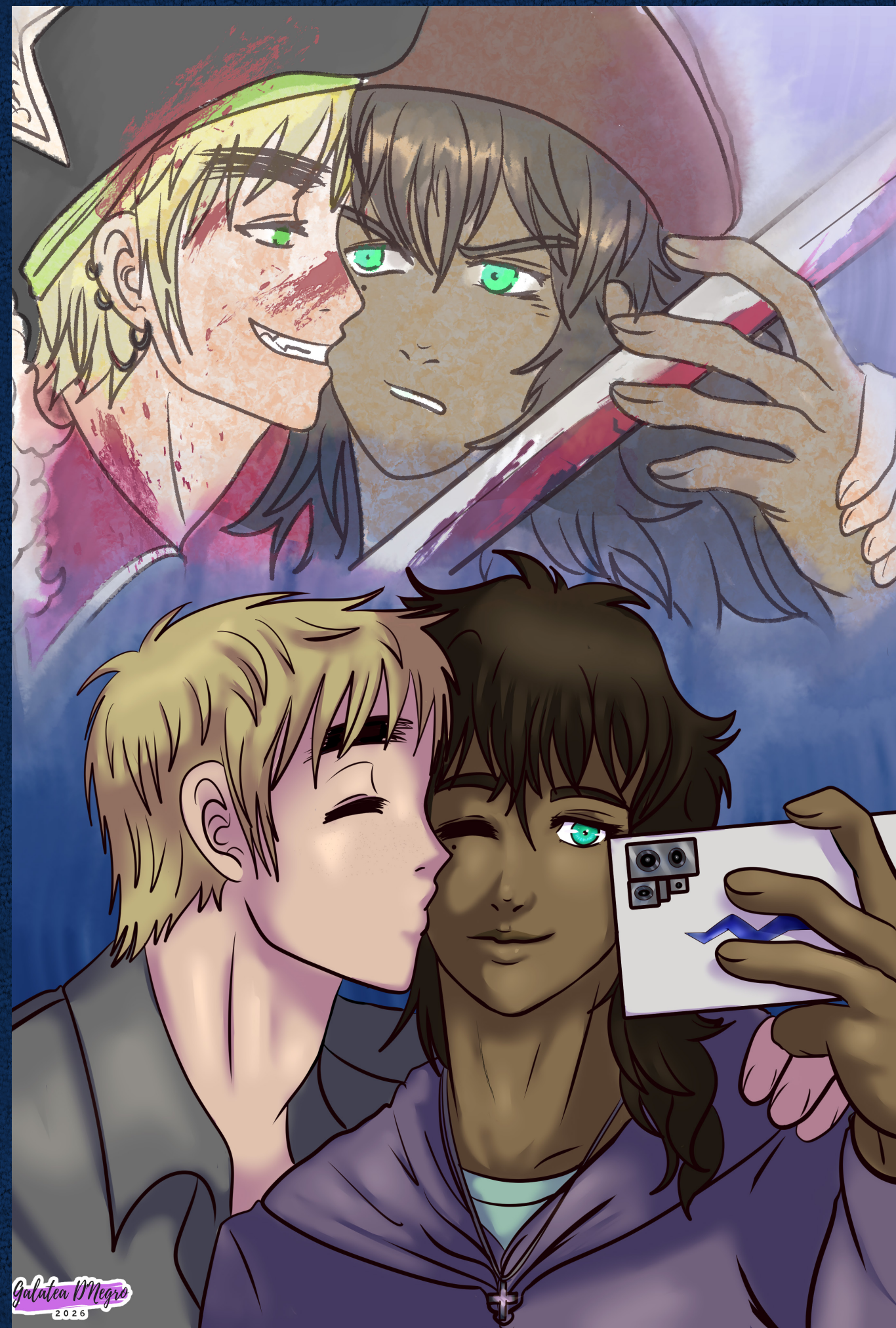
“Your accent was a bit strong, but ja, you did. Except you called Austria ‘Australia’ again.”

“Whatever, I asked Sugar Plum how to ask it in y’all’s language.”

“Why do you call him Sugar Plum?”

“Have y’all seen the man’s wardrobe?”

Ludwig laughed at his fiancé. “Guter Punkt.”



IN THE BLINK

WRITTEN BY: IRONBRUTUS

Spring arrived eagerly, barely able to contain itself. London watched, bewildered and bleary-eyed, as balmy weather and blue skies descended upon the frostbitten city; while the country's back was turned, February had slipped between the cracks and March had quickly filled them, breathing blooming, boundless life back into the frigid thoroughfares. The hesitant winter sunshine grew emboldened by its own reflection on the South Bank of the Thames and stretched between buildings and buttresses, dancing between bin sheds and Ben as it circled the central city.

The unseasonable warmth hadn't just restricted itself to London—when Alasdair left Edinburgh, he'd been nearly sweating, too toasty in his wool jacket and squinting against an afternoon far brighter than he'd prepared himself to withstand. Even so, the sunshine always lifted his spirits and quelled the old anxieties of entertaining Arthur in his own domain; carrying his jacket over his arm, Alasdair began his journey from King's Cross on foot, happy to forgo the convenience of the Underground to walk freely in the balmy afternoon.

Of course, this meant he really was sweating by the time he crossed Waterloo Bridge. Surely Arthur would have some comment about his dishevelled appearance, but the respite from winter's usual rain and wind was worth a damp shirt. As he headed towards the riverbank, a small forgiving breeze momentarily cooled his skin; Alasdair let his eyes close, pausing his stroll to enjoy the sensation. When he reopened them, they landed nearly immediately on a familiar crop of blonde hair just paces away, a golden beacon closer and more familiar than the brightness of any celestial star.

Arthur's back was to him; he was standing beside the railing at Festival Pier, looking at something in the water, his own jacket trapped under his arm. As Alasdair approached, the Englishman turned, clearly sensing his arrival. They were hardly alone—pedestrians and children on electric scooters blocked their path, and the noise of a curiously sun-warmed city surrounded them—but they were immediately aware of one another. Arthur faced him, offering his signature, tight-lipped smile, and Alasdair returned it with a wry grin of his own.

"Did you walk here from Edinburgh?" Arthur asked by way of greeting. His eyes held Alasdair's, almost politely refusing to give the taller man an obvious once-over.

"Aye, and then some. Walked right from the top of Ben Nevis down—this is I think day three now of straight solid walking with no rest."

Arthur raised a brow. "Really? Well. You must be thirsty." His smile grew, unfurling like a white flag. "Considering it's just us, I suppose it can't hurt to buy you a drink. Surely you can walk a short while longer before you collapse?"

Alasdair shifted his jacket to the other arm, busying his hands as he broke their gaze, his grin softening. "Won't refuse a drink, no. Not in this heat." Together, they headed south, sidestepping tourists and elderly couples as they made their way along the river bank. Shared centuries of begrudging companionship had left them both without a preference for constant conversation, so they enjoyed an easy silence as they journeyed side-by-side, weaving between the queues forming underneath the Eye and along the wall outside the dungeon. As they passed the aquarium, Alasdair's gaze landed briefly on a young boy excitedly clutching a stuffed bear in a blue duffel coat, and he felt a quiet fondness for the city, despite his burdensome relationship to it.

"Just across the bridge, then?" Arthur asked once they'd reached the stairs. Alasdair shrugged, nodding. Arthur was already ascending, but he waited for Alasdair to join him before they both headed west, merging with the throng of joggers and tourists making the migration across Westminster Bridge.

The air was thick and full, buzzing with voices, heavy with the smell of an ancient city reborn. Listless clouds momentarily blinded the sun, shielding them briefly from its glare; Alasdair blinked to reset the balance of the colours surrounding him, the verdigris lampposts, the bright poppy buses, the fiery neon of a pedicab scrambling past. In the next moment, the afternoon brightness returned, and the Thames churned greedily beneath it, soaking the rays into its silt-stained waters. On the opposite shore, the familiar clock tower was a golden beacon, both black hands reaching heavenward for the warmth that cascaded over its spire and down the belfry. Alasdair kept his eyes on it as they crossed the water, remembering how the horizon looked when it wasn't there at all.

His gaze finally shifted back to his companion once they'd reached Northbank—Arthur's expression was mostly neutral, save for the angle of his clenched jaw. He looked much as he always did, carefully constructed with only an air of something threadbare about him, something Alasdair could always find even when Arthur tried his best to hide it.

"You alright then?" Alasdair asked once they'd reached Boudicca and the crowds thinned. His voice seemed to pull Arthur from a distant thought; the smaller man's expression quickly broke, softening, ice melting on a counter top.

"Grand. Even with this weather mucking up my plans."

Alasdair laughed. "Fuck the sun for havin' the audacity to shine outside of its allocated three weeks."

"Well I can hardly see is all," Arthur replied, brushing some errant fringe from his eyes. "And it's disrupting my sleep. A body accustomed to a certain set of conditions is of course going to take issue with those patterns changing without warning."

"Someone had better do something," Alasdair supplied, reaching up to tug at his collar, fanning his skin slightly with the motion. "You runnin' on fumes is a real hell hath no."

Arthur scoffed, casting him a thin glare. "And I suppose you've been overjoyed about it as well, have you? Spending the last days of winter out on the lake with a beer?"

"Didn't have time, what with walking all the way here from Lochaber," Alasdair replied, his tone overly serious. "And you know, when I left it was snowing."

"Right, yes, well you must be very proud of yourself to have accomplished such a trek. Pity it landed you here."

Thoughtlessly, Alasdair reached out and slung an arm around the shorter man's shoulders, giving him a brief squeeze. "Worse places to be. Worse company."

"Doubt it," Arthur replied, but he let himself be held, even for that brief moment. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but Alasdair thought he spied a crease in his smile that hadn't previously been, another stitch come loose and not immediately snipped. "At least you're not here to set fire to anything."

"Now why would I be? Last I recall, the person responsible for fire raising, notably—" Alasdair withdrew his arm to gesture to the grand golden building that flanked them to the left. "—that quaint little place just over there, was none other than yourself now, wasn't it?"

Arthur snorted, crossing his arms. "Me? A felon? Doesn't sound like me." "Course not, must be some other arrogant blonde English bastard," Alasdair quipped, grinning when Arthur returned an expletive. "Where are we headed, anyway?"

"It's not far," Arthur replied, leading them onto Parliament Square.

"We've been before, ages ago. You'll remember."

"You've got some faith in my ability to remember all the pubs we've been to together."

"In that case, I'll lead and you keep up, yeah?"

Alasdair hummed, adjusting his jacket again as he followed the shorter man. "Aye, Cap'n."

Arthur's brisk navigation led them along Broad Sanctuary, past the familiar white facade of St. Margaret's, until a large tour group flocking near the entrance to the Abbey slowed their pace. Alasdair didn't mind; he returned the apologetic smile of a visored guide with one of easy understanding. Summer had come early to Britain, why not soak up every ounce of it?

"You'd think people would've had enough of crumbling churches," Arthur commented quietly, shouldering past a couple taking a selfie. "Don't they know most of them aren't even that old?"

"Most people aren't as ancient and decrepit as us," Alasdair returned, watching the dappled light that filtered through the overhead Plane tree leaves dance across Arthur's shoulders. It reminded him of the fallow deer that roamed the Cairngorms when the frost subsided. "Anything over 50 years old is prehistoric to them."

"Children," Arthur muttered, but his gaze was fond as it followed a man who'd hoisted a young boy onto his shoulders to see over the gate. "Gone in an instant."

They crossed the road and continued west down Tothill Street, flanked by the brutalist white teeth of Caxton House and the sixth form across it. Alasdair ran a hand through his damp hair and noticed Arthur did the same some paces ahead, mussing his already jagged locks. The city had quieted to a murmur, and the sound of their footsteps echoed pleasantly against the concrete, joined only occasionally by the footfall of business people darting between black glass doors and black Range Rovers. Someone laughed loudly from a room five stories above their heads, and farther away, two dogs began to bark in syncopated rhythm.

It seemed only seconds before Arthur turned again, heading north, and as Alasdair followed his shadow down a narrow lane walled by pristine, red-bricked buildings, he finally remembered walking this specific part of London before, trailing after the same flaxen mop to visit the same lopsided public house that lay waiting for them round the bend.

"Christ, to think it's still standing," he said on the approach, shielding his eyes with one hand as he appraised the establishment. "And not a Spoons, at that."

The pub had been painted and redone some, changed management by the looks of the font on the awning, but the overhead sign was familiar and still charmingly archaic; if it wasn't the original, it was a very convincing copy.

Lush blooms hung from baskets above the entryway and along the outer walls, fragrant bundles of pink and white geraniums and yellow million bells bursting from beneath the traditional lamps, now painted gold.

"Can't auction off all my favourite spots, can I," Arthur replied, lingering in the entryway. "Shall we go in?"

He didn't wait for a reply, ducking inside as if he were afraid rain might begin pouring down any minute. Given their location, it wasn't an irrational worry. Alasdair followed.

There were already a few patrons occupying the pub, so Alasdair tucked himself into a corner table while Arthur negotiated their drinks at the counter. The interior was clean, stylish, incredibly unfamiliar, save for the low ceiling and worn wood floor which surely had been replaced since Alasdair's most recent visit. He couldn't remember when he'd been here last, or why it seemingly held such importance, but a feeling of nostalgic familiarity nonetheless settled in his chest as he surveilled the furniture and decoration, recognising none of it.

"Nineteen forty-five," Arthur said, appearing at his elbow with two pints of amber liquid.

"What's that?"

"When you were here last. 1945. Weren't you wondering?"

"Ah," Alasdair replied, unwilling to confirm. "What a year."

Arthur slid across from him with a small huff. "One would think it was only yesterday, what with the state of things."

"You said that in the 80's too," Alasdair reminded him, folding his arms as he leaned back in his chair. "Can't keep saying that with every regime change."

"Can't I?" Arthur replied, already bringing his glass to his lips. "What's the use of history if it won't stop repeating itself?"

"Cynical as ever. Aren't we drinkin' to celebrate? Here I was waitin' for a toast but you're already one step ahead."

Arthur's brows knit as he replaced his glass on the table, looking mildly ashamed. "Sorry."

"Am only joking. Hurry up and get more of that in you before this turns sour." Alasdair winked as he raised his glass to take a drink, but Arthur put out a hand to stop him, resting pale fingers over his wrist.

"No, no you're right, we should absolutely toast. It's an anniversary, it's the least we can do."

Alasdair dutifully waited, holding his drink aloft. "Right then. Cheers to..."

"...To surviving 1945," Arthur finished wryly. Alasdair let out a bark of a laugh.

"Aye, and then some. Cheers to 1945, Happy New Year." His grin softened.

"And seriously, Art, cheers to you for survivin' the last 25 years."

"Surviving, well that's a bit overkill, isn't it?" Arthur returned his glass to the table, letting it dangle just above the wood. His eyes followed it, lowering beneath thick lashes. "Things've been alright."

"Can't say the same," Alasdair replied, bringing his glass to his lips. "But in my view, times can be hard even without back-to-back global war."

Arthur glanced up, his green eyes reflecting the low bulbs of the ceiling like miniature lagoons. "I know for you it's—I'm not trying to complain." "Not sayin' you are. Now have a fuckin' drink and try bein' proud of somethin' good for once."

Arthur complied, lifting his pint with a slight nod. "Right, yeah. Alright. Cheers."

They both took a swig. Arthur soon chased it with another, and Alasdair chuckled, following suit. The sour beer warmed them both in a way the sun beyond the walls never could, closer and older and deeper than bone. Alasdair asked about celebrations, about sustainability initiatives, about referendums, and Arthur talked about building codes, about drone displays, about how nowadays he had to schedule time away from his bloody phone, what nonsense. Conversation and ale flowed until they lowered their tired defences and lay down their long-blunt weapons of hostility, and before they knew it, the last threads pulled loose, and all points of history existed simultaneously as they were soldiers and sailors and kings again.

Sometime between Arthur's second order of chips and Alasdair's third toilet break, the sky grew so dark that the lights outside began to glow, attracting both lovesick moths and boisterous patrons. Alasdair was considering another glass of water when Arthur stood suddenly, knocking back his stool.

"Fuck it, let's go. Let's go!" he breathed, shout-whispering as he bunched his jacket into his hands. Alasdair stood only slightly more carefully, leaning a firm hand against the table.

"Lead on then, fuck, before you destroy the place," he teased, pulling his own coat over his shoulders. Arthur laughed uncaringly, but righted his chair all the same before grabbing hold of Alasdair's forearm.

"C'mon already!" he chided, steering the taller man to the exit. "Keep up!"

Alasdair did his best. Arthur was a lightning bolt, splitting the crowd as he dragged the taller man behind him. They flew down the narrow road, back towards the abbey; buses and buildings passed them in a blur, dog-walkers and pub crawlers shrank back from their approach at the last moment as the pair hurtled towards the river's edge. Alasdair only remembered to breathe when they finally slowed to cross the bridge, catching himself on the railing before he accidentally flung himself into the Thames. Beside him, Arthur let go of his arm.

"You'd think God or the Devil's behind us," Alasdair joked, running his hands through his hair as he regained his breath. They still kept a rather brisk pace, but the world around them was sharper now, lit with a combination of gas lamps and LED fireflies. "I think London will still be here tomorrow, unfortunately."

"Shut up," Arthur coughed, breathing hard next to him. "It's not open to the public yet, but it's, but I—just, you'll see. I never got to do it with you, can you believe it? In all this time."

Alasdair glanced at him sidelong as they neared the South Bank shore, eyebrows twisted in confusion. "I know the law hardly has a hold over us, but I thought the point was to blend in."

Arthur shook his head, grinning. In the green light of the bridge, he looked otherworldly, his skin imbued with magic that had long left them both. "It'll be fine. I've got special access to things, same as you. Nothing criminal about it."

"Right," Alasdair relented, following Arthur as he leapt down the steps.

"So it won't be my fault if we end up in the nick."

"Stop being so paranoid, it's like I don't even know you anymore!" Arthur retorted, letting his words slide into each other as he marched along the riverbank. "You're supposed to say, 'Och, an adventure,' and go along with it!"

Alasdair's grin could have split the moon in two. "Right, pardon me, 'm forgettin' myself. Where was I—Och! An adventure!" He saluted and pranced an overambitious jig step before catching his boot on an uneven paving stone, throwing himself accidentally against Arthur's back. The pair laughed together like schoolboys, each half supporting the other as they continued their perilous journey, until Arthur stopped them before a glass doorway and Alasdair, lifting his head, realised what they were about to do.

"Up there?" he asked, straining his neck to assess the scale of the white wheel that hung above them.

"It's only the largest cantilevered wheel in the world, mate. Don't tell me you're afraid of it." Arthur was smug as he pushed open the door.

No one else seemed to be around, not even a guard or a passerby. Impossibly, London had quieted itself for them, ushered onlookers off the streets, occupied all the tiny, fleeting lives that busied themselves in its beating heart.

Arthur had ascended the gangplank and was waiting for him near an open capsule, eyes wide and dark like the rushing river beneath him. He tapped a hand against the frame of the pod, nodding to Alasdair.

"C'mon. We're celebrating, aren't we?"

Alasdair approached. A heaviness he couldn't explain settled in his chest as he met that familiar emerald gaze. It was useless, finding meaning in any one moment out of their endless, meaningless moments. And yet.

"Aye. After you."





LEADING TO FOREVER

WRITTEN BY: PRU

OCTOBER 1783

Gilbert could hardly believe it when the surrender came and Alfred, this lanky kid who could barely fire a musket just a few years ago, had gained independence. Of course, his own training of Alfred and his closest troops, plus some great diplomatic measures of getting French soldiers and ships, had helped. Gilbert was proud of this now new nation. The United States of America. He hoped it would last. Just the other night, Alfred had come by his temporary housing, drunk and whooping like he didn't know any better. And maybe he didn't. He'd never been his own country. And, across the ocean, he was largely alone. He had his brother, Mathieu, and there was a neighbor to the south that Antonio had a tight hold on, but it wasn't like being in Europe. Not where many had been around for over a millennia at this point. They just knew how to act proper. Gilbert had failed to instill this in Alfred. But, even now, sitting in his study, quill in hand to send a letter to his King, Gilbert found the youthfulness of Alfred sweet. He reminded him of Holy Rome. If Holy Rome was ever able to get out from under the thumb of Austria...

Dipping the quill, Gilbert started in on a new letter. He was to leave to return to Prussia in a fortnight. He would leave his final thoughts in a letter to Alfred, how he was alone out here, how he would be scrutinized now. How independence was a foreign concept but he's done it. Now was the time to celebrate. Tomorrow? Tomorrow he would learn to govern. And Gilbert would not be able to help him. He should take guidance from Francis.

While a monarchy, France would be the United States' closest ally in Europe. Although Gilbert would pass on these words of wisdom: It was better to keep a tight circle of trusted friends than be a friend to everyone.

Once he was done with his letter to Alfred, he looked out the window at the setting sun, and gave a small hum. What was freedom?

Not like he was subjugated, but Ludovic... His little older brother was a perpetual child. Unlike Alfred, who he had seen grow physically as the war had gone on, Ludovic stayed small and meek. It wasn't fair. Maybe... Maybe he could help his brother to grow. Maybe his own lesson here in the New World could be brought back to Europe, to Holy Rome.

Maybe he could help his brother grow...

SUMMER 1864

Dear Alfred,
News of your ongoing internal conflict has reached me. I apologize that I cannot be there for you, nor offer any solace. Upon the end of the war with Napoleon, I disappeared from my duties at large. I am still in contact with the royal family of Prussia, but I am also working behind the scenes to do something I wished to have done a long time ago: I wish to unite the German kingdoms into one German Empire. And I have the ability to do so. I

don't recall if I ever told you about Ludovic, the representative of the Holy Roman Empire. He was my elder brother. Francis saw to his destruction in 1806 and, ever since then, I have been planning. These plans led me to an orphanage in the Alsace region where I stumbled upon a young boy. As luck would have it, I get a second chance at raising Ludovic, this time as my protege. His name is now Ludwig. I can tell from the nightmares that he is Ludovic reborn. Though he seemingly has no waking recollections of who he used to be. I have you to thank for this. This plan to unite into a German empire.

Had it not been your war against England, I might never have conceived of such a notion. But I have. It will take more time. The kingdoms are stubborn, but not as stubborn as me. I will not go into my plans. I would like you to remember me as a firm but just mentor. There is no need for you to learn otherwise.

With the news of Ludwig, can we keep that between us? I am raising him outside of the courts until I know he's ready to shoulder what is to come. Again, inspired by you.

I welcome your coming letter that says you have finished your internal war and have come back stronger for it.
Your friend,

Gilbert M. Beilschmidt

JANUARY 1871

Dear Alfred,

I did it. I succeeded in uniting the kingdoms. In three days, Ludwig will make his debut as the German Empire. I continue to be amazed at his growth. Already, he is the size you were when you became a country. He's not a small child anymore. I am a proud brother. I am heartened by your last letter that you continue to expand across the continent. I am hoping to meet again in the coming years, once Germany is stable and rebellion is quashed.

All of this seems to be a dream turned reality. Is this how you felt that fateful day of the final surrender? I recall your many days of celebration, of the alcohol flowing and you passing out on my couch for days on end. Whooping and cheering before you got to work.

I must admit, in that time, I thought you uncouth. However, seeing Ludwig be all stoic and unsmiling at his coming coronation, I wonder if perhaps you had the right reaction. I must wonder if I've been more firm than familial these last few decades raising the boy. He has a strong head on his shoulders. He will be everything I ever dreamed of for Ludovic. I feel a sense of trepidation, however, as the coronation comes closer. Should I have been more fair? Taught him more philosophy and classics? Time will tell. With the trepidation is a surge of pride for what he is to become.

I will send a letter again in the summer. Perhaps, by then, you can take a break and come to Germany and meet Ludwig. I believe you two would be fast friends. And he sorely needs more friends. I believe your energetic ways would be beneficial to his social growth.

I await your letter affirming a friendly trip this summer.

Your friend,

Gilbert M. Beilschmidt

AUTUMN 1925

Gilbert wiped sweat off his brow as the unusual warmth of the day seeped into his body. The windows of the Stag offices were open, but he couldn't shake the heat. It was mid-day and he was reviewing the reparation payments he'd forced Ludwig to agree to after the end of the Great War. It was causing so much financial strife, but there was peace.

Ludwig had lost some weight and muscle since 1918, but he was still a formidable opponent at meetings. Tall with broad shoulders.

He now slicked his hair back, making him look older. Gilbert wondered if this was because he didn't think he was taken seriously enough. Which was a possibility.

He and Ludwig lived in the mansion together, joined by Berlin and an ever revolving set of states. They were all struggling. But German unity was stronger than ever it seemed. Except in Bavaria. As usual, Konrad was stirring the pot, calling for his own, independent, state. Even though he needed Germany as much as the rest of them did.

Gilbert put his pen down and packed up his papers into his briefcase. As a state of Germany himself, Gilbert did his best to support his brother, which was why he was a permanent fixture at the Stag and the mansion.

Today, though, he was leaving work early to meet with his former protege who had turned the tide in the Great War.

He and Alfred had been exchanging letters every few months for well over a century now. Though they had become scarce since 1914. So it had surprised Gilbert to receive a telegram from his friend saying he was in Berlin and wanted to meet up. It wasn't a diplomatic mission, and he hadn't shared with Ludwig that Alfred was in the city, he'd just told his secretary he was leaving and left it at that.

Alfred had picked a family run restaurant near downtown to eat. Gilbert was familiar with it. It had been around for a few generations at this point. It had great German food and somehow it was surviving these trials they were under.

It wasn't hard to find the American when he arrived. He had grown even more since 1920, which was the last time he'd seen him.

For a moment, he looked over the blond, wondering what was going on to be meeting like this. He already had a coffee and bread at the table. And he was reading a book while waiting for Gilbert to join him. He looked smart in his suit and his hair was tamed compared to the last time he'd seen him.

Going to the table, Gilbert put on one of his more cocky smiles and took a seat across from his protege. "Alfred Jones in the flesh. You didn't give much information in your telegram. Did you miss me?" He greeted in his accented English.

Alfred looked up, wide eyed for a moment, before there was a small flush to his cheeks like he'd been caught looking at girls. Then he put a mark in his book and closed it.

"Was it that obvious?" He didn't seem so sure of that question and then looked anywhere other than Gilbert. It was as if he was catching up to his wild thoughts. "It's been, what, five years since we last met? You're looking good for someone who started, and lost, a war that included the entire world." Alfred seemed to settle on as his own form of greeting.

The cocky smile left Gilbert's face and he scowled for a moment. "Roderich started it and he barely got into trouble. Please tell me this isn't why you're here. We're making our payments. We're starving our people and working them to the bone. If that's all you had to say, I will take my leave." And he moved to stand once again, even though he had just been seated.

Sky blue eyes went wide, and a large hand reached out to him. "No! I'm sorry. I'm not sure I know how to talk to you anymore. I'm here as a friend. Please, stay."

Gilbert thought for a moment before nodding and retaking his seat. "I could tell. You haven't responded to my letters in a year." He tried to not sound hurt, but he was hurt. Certainly they hadn't strained their friendship that much...

Alfred, for his part, gave a guilty look. "Things have been busy at home. And the people still distrust Germany. It's difficult to separate my own feelings from the feelings of the people. I know you understand that. You're the one who warned me about how the pull could be."

And, the thing was, that Gilbert did understand the predicament. Even with his plans for a German Empire, he'd been swayed by the will of the people, and he saw Ludwig swayed differently than himself. It worried Gilbert. He was uncertain for the future. But he would do anything he needed to do to ensure the survival of Germany.

"I did warn you. So, tell me, what have you been up to since our last letter? We can share stories of home together."

And then they would spend the remainder of the afternoon swapping stories, and Gilbert would return home, a funny feeling in his stomach and thoughts of a certain blond on his mind.

FEBRUARY 1947

It had been decreed and the days were ticking down. Prussia would officially cease to exist, though it hadn't existed since 1933. This was the Allies' final punishment. Gilbert knew his death was impending. He had barely healed in the nearly two years since the war had ended in Europe. They'd kept him separate from Ludwig. Prussia was the big bad guy. Hell, Prussia had been the Big Bad of Europe for centuries now. Constantly at war. Of course he would raise Germany to be a warmonger as well.

The punishment would have been handed to Ludwig if Gilbert hadn't seen his days nearing their end. Upon the fall of Berlin, he'd made sure to play up the bad guy angle. Ludwig would survive this in his stead. And the Allies were more than happy to believe him over the "impressionable" Ludwig. Good. That ensured German survival.

Gilbert was writing the final letters in his cell when he heard the door unlock. Looking up, he saw the Golden Boy himself, Alfred F. Jones, walk in. The Prussian quickly added a paper on top of the one he was writing on. Which was his last letter. Going to Alfred.

"Alfred? Or the United States?" He asked firmly.

"Alfred. Just Alfred." Came a tired reply and Gilbert motioned for him to sit.

"You... Look like someone bombed you."

"Well I was bombed, thank you. Königsberg and Berlin were bombed. And I felt that pain. I still feel that pain. Thanks for pointing that out." He meant to have a rude tone, but he just sounded tired. He'd done and seen enough. He was ready to die. Maybe Alfred would put him out of his misery as the new leader of the free world.

Alfred, for his part, looked like he felt bad. Then his eyes drifted to the desk Gilbert was at. "Journal entries?" He asked cautiously.

"Something like that. What can I do for you, Alfred?"

"I came to see if you would reconsider your position."

"My position?" A white brow raised.

Alfred nodded, so sure of himself. "Let Ludwig take the fall. I know this war was more him than you. Say it was his idea, that you followed along because he had you by the throat. There's no need to die for him."

Gilbert gave a rueful laugh and he shook his head. "Now what kind of example would I be, Mr. Jones, if I let you talk me into that? No, I will not let him take the fall for this. But... could you do something for me?" He asked, touching the pile of letters, "keep him safe? Help him grow, learn, thrive in this new world you're all building. He's going to be without me. This will be my last failure to him."

Alfred looked for a moment like he was going to argue, to fight, but then he nodded with watery eyes. "I can do that, as a final gift to you, Gilbert. I'll take care of him."

"Thank you. Now, please leave. I need to finish my final entries and I don't need you seeing what I have to say."

And then he turned away, not wanting to watch Alfred go for the final time. It crushed him. He might have given into the request if Alfred had fought him on this. But no, he heard the sound of Alfred getting up and then there was a pause when the door opened, and then there was a final click of the door and click of the lock and Gilbert knew he was alone. And that's when he felt the tears for the first time in a long time.

JANUARY 18, 2016

It was a cold morning in New York and Gilbert blindly reached over for his personal bed warmer and only found emptiness on the other side of the bed. Cracking his eyes open, he turned his head to find nothing there. Odd. Alfred never got out of bed before him.

Sitting up, he stretched and threw the blankets off himself, not bothering with making the bed as he put on his slippers and crossed the room to get his robe. Wrapping himself in his warm robe, he made his way through the penthouse, hearing the sounds of cooking coming from the kitchen.

Gilbert paused as he entered the kitchen. Alfred's back was to him. He had moments to decide if he was going back to bed now that he knew where his heater was, or shoving his cold hands under his American's shirt and making him cold momentarily.

Apparently, he paused too long, because he heard a "you're supposed to be in bed" without Alfred having turned to see him.

"I was cold." Came his lame reply. And Alfred gave one of those laughs that sounded like sunshine and turned to him.

"Then get over here. I'll cook with one hand." And he put out an inviting arm that Gilbert only hesitated a moment before going over and leeching onto Alfred's side.

"Are you making pancakes?"

"Yes. And I have bacon in the oven. You were supposed to wake up to breakfast in bed."

"In bed? What's the occasion?" He asked, very serious. "Wait, it's Monday, why aren't you already on your way down to DC?"

Alfred laughed, the rumble vibrating Gilbert, who put his head on the taller man's shoulder as he wrapped his arms around the American.

"Gilbie. It's your birthday!" Alfred exclaimed: squeezing him gently.

And Gilbert just blinked. It was his birthday. It had been a while since he'd acknowledged this day. He'd tried to forget it. What with all the baggage that came with this day. In the five years they'd been dating, he was sure they'd never celebrated his birthday. They always celebrated Alfred's and then celebrated Reunification Day in October. Good holidays to celebrate. "Gilbie?" Alfred inquired gently and he looked up at his boyfriend.

"Since when do we celebrate my actual birthday?"

"Since I found out from Ludwig that you think you don't deserve to celebrate this day. I even took the day off. Just the two of us. Cuddling, playing games, reading, whatever you want to do, we'll do." Alfred declared and Gilbert turned his head to hide his face in his shoulder, though he was smiling.

Leave it to Ludwig to share that information. Blabber mouth. He and Alfred had been friends for decades now. The Marshall Plan and Alfred's careful watch had helped mold Ludwig into the leader of Europe he was now. And they'd become best friends and only gotten closer since Gilbert and Alfred had started dating. It was sweet.

"Okay. You might have taken the day off, but I haven't."

"It's taken care of."

"Oh?" And he lifted his head to look at Alfred, curious to hear how it was taken care of.

"I told your boss it's your birthday and she said you were all mine."

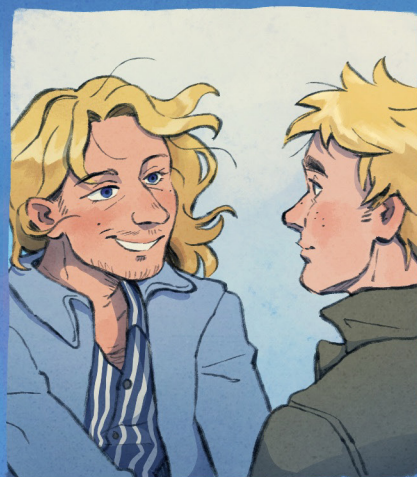
His boss. The president of the European Union. Now that had been a shock when the Great Recession happened and they figured out he was actually the EU. There had been questions on how he had survived. First as the Teutonic Knights, then as Prussia, then as East Germany. All through the 1990s, they all silently wondered why Gilbert was alive when he had no country, no land, no people. And then the Great Recession had happened and he got sick. And then better. And then they realized his illnesses matched when EU countries were struggling. It all sort of came to an "ah-ha" moment.

And now, here he was, dating the United States, with his brother being the leader of Europe. Really, these days he was spoiled by those in his life. Not because he was a large trade-union, but because he'd made amends since the 90s. He'd lost the taste of war and just wanted a life where he could use his knowledge for good. And for good did he do all of his work.

"Okay. I'm all yours. Give me a kiss. I'm going to go back to bed so I get breakfast in bed and we can do this day right."

One lingering kiss later, Gilbert was thinking of their long history together. Never did he imagine this man would be who he ended up with. But it was right.

And he wouldn't let this go.



FAMILLIAR RUBBLE

WRITTEN BY: DOOMSPIRAL

Twenty years since re-declaring independence from the Soviet Union, six years since joining NATO, and less than twelve hours since arriving at the hotel near the beginning of their planned hike to the coast, Tolys Laurinaitis hunched against the outside of the a public urinal to quickly look through his phone before Gilbert could find him.

[06:21] Markas: Mr. Lithuania, where did you say you left the files regarding the Baltic fisheries?

[06:21] Tolys: They are on the green desk.

[06:21] Tolys: Underneath the box labeled "Do Not Open".

[06:25] Markas: These are about hunting licenses

[06:25] Tolys: Under

Tolys switched to his email and waited for them to load, bouncing his foot and chewing a the edge of chapped skin from the inside of his lip. There was chap stick in his back pocket. He would use it in a moment. A text reply popped up, obscuring the top lines of the email from the mayor of Vilnius assuring him everything would be just fine in his absence. He had declined to answer any of the questions in Tolys' previous email.

[06:35] Markas: Gytis had them, sorry

"Busted." The words so close behind Tolys caused him to nearly drop his phone with its already cracked screen. Gilbert hip-checked him into the metal wall and snatched the phone from around and below before Tolys could pin his elbows tight enough to his chest. "Workaholic, let it go—" With a final jerk, he prised it free of Tolys' grasp and tucked it into Tolys' back pocket with a snort.

"They need me," Tolys said, imploring him.

"They need you to take a breather." Gilbert gripped Tolys by the trapezius muscle and shook him with a smile that infected the other despite his resistance. When the other had loosened up enough, Gilbert led him to the trail head, patting him on the back as he watched the greenery fill Tolys' lungs and steal away some of the tension in his face.

The outdoors embraced them as sunlight warmed the leaves and filtered down through mossy branches. Birds darted around above them through the treetops, flying insects were stirred up by their breath and sent away in dizzy swirls, and fungi clung to damp roots and pushed through black dirt to watch them pass. It had been some time since Tolys had gone on anything resembling a march, or hike, or anything more than a brisk walk to and from public stations. More often he spent the night over his desk rather than going home, bringing his dog into the

office out of guilt for abandoning her for so many hours at a time. Sweat built up beneath his shirt quickly and his breath came with the dull, dragging ache of misused lungs.

Even without the sedentary lifestyle he had boxed himself into, the cigarettes weren't helping his case any.

In direct contrast to his predicament, Gilbert was chipper and light on the balls of his sneakered feet. Tolys' gaze drifted down over Gilbert's profile and back as he took the lead in their hike, appreciating the retained muscles in his back and hindquarters despite his rather enthusiastic uptake of foreign foods and the liquors that paired.

"How have your travels been, then? It always looks, huff, like you're off having a lot of fun. On your blog." His eyes darted up before Gilbert could catch him staring at his ass as the other man turned his head to reply.

"I've been in Berlin a lot more lately. I'm trying out a tenured position."

"When did you get tenured?"

"Hunh? Oh right, it was sort of an accelerated thing," Gilbert waved his hand dismissively. "You were up to your eyeballs in paperwork"

"Are you still in charge of training drills?"

"Well, I was, this is just instruction for mechanical engineering, I get to bark at the nerds now that's all"

In the time since they had last separated, it seemed as though Gilbert had made the most of things. Traveling frequently, acting as den-mother drill sergeant to a slew of international soldier wannabes, and now a professorship. It was impressive. It put the taste of copper to the back of Tolys' throat, and his mind twisted over and once again over thinking of how far behind he felt no matter how far he progressed.

They rounded the top of an incline where trees had thinned out around the trail, yellow and white flowers rioting down the landscape, bobbing joyfully in the breeze. Tolys drank from his bottle and reveled in the realization that water only tasted so good when he was forcing his body to remember his own topography. At any given moment during his usual day scurrying around whichever office claimed to need him least (a sure sign that they needed more meddling than ever) he would be consuming caffeine in its various forms, or supplementing it with enough hard liquor to wear down the edges of the day.

A few paces away was Gilbert, stretching in the dappled shade of an aspen tree. His shirt rode up where it stuck to his sweaty torso and Tolys' focus slipped. There was once a time he only caught glimpses of Gilbert through trees, through cracked open doorways and mistaken entry. Time spent growing close enough to merge in hidden and dusty corners of the soviet estate and then not much later within the prefabricated apartment shared between only the two of them.

It had not been their first forced proximity. There was the time before that in Poland's glittering ascendancy, the Commonwealth resplendent. The ache in his legs and his lungs brought back green memories of losing their horses during a hunt and he, in his finery and saber, trying to keep up with the little sandy-haired brat chasing down a hare like just one more hound.

"You're ogling," Gilbert said, interrupting his thoughts with an oily smirk. "That means you can hike."

Tolys gave him a wan smile and sighed. He found that it was indeed easier to breathe, more than enough to resume the fair march Gilbert had them traversing the countryside at. The region was not as mountainous as some, but to those out of practice it was still formidable to go such distances at the pace Gilbert wished. "Don't you understand that time spent in nature is meant to be relaxing?"

"Nature, relaxing? You mean the sun that gives you cancer and the storms that drown people. I've never felt more relaxed than sleeping in a hole outside no man's land." Despite his words, the tone with which they were spoken remained light. Conversing with Gilbert was an exercise in keeping the peace.

The motions were worn into his hands like water imprinting itself onto stones. He unlocked his phone and took his chances sneaking a look at the messages now piling up in his inbox with an increasing sensation of dread. It wasn't that they couldn't work without him, surely, but they certainly didn't seem to work well in his absence. So many strange mistakes, so many absurd questions, he chewed the inside of his cheek as he flicked airplane mode back on and pocketed the phone in order to attempt keeping up on the trail.

His mind cleared to match the sunny midday sky, and then gradually clouded once more with thoughts of what he had left behind to go on this foolish walk to the shore. This time when he went through the motions of checking on his dear humans, Gilbert snatched the phone from his hands. The man waved off his protests and tisked at him. "They're going to be fine."

"They are already doing it wrong... You don't understand what it's like, trying to build up in this current climate. The, the technology, the new laws, I mean—"

"They're stupid because you fix everything for them. Let them suck for a bit," Gilbert put the phone in the pocket attached to his backpack's waist strap despite Tolys' big green eyes and worried frown. "Besides, what can they possibly mess up for you in three days? You wouldn't even agree to a real vacation. I am effectively babysitting you for the weekend."

Tolys rubbed a knuckle against his forehead but nodded. Tension built in his already weakened guts, but... Gilbert was right, surely (for once). While Tolys was a powerhouse in helping his people, he was still no policy writer, no mover nor shaker. He transferred his skills as Ivan's personal secretary to his own government, where he'd have preferred to put himself to work anyway. It would be a mess to clean up when he returned, but truth be told, if they were going to set the place on fire they would be able to do so with or without him present.

The woods around them changed from darker canopy to brighter greens and sandy paths beneath their feet. Early summer bloomed in spades around them. Tolys had thought marching on sure ground was tough on his lungs, now he had to slow down to keep his ankles from crying out too much as the earth softened beneath him.

A memory flickered through his mind. Gilbert at court in Pomeranian finery, his husband an inkwell's shadow at his side. From there, a quick diversion to the day's just before, when the boy had been his charge, just for a little while, just long enough to hope for a moment that the past could be past the future more sweet. Tolys blinked and felt his mind ice over with memories of the Knights and their strange rules, their crosses and burnings and deals between merchants. Among them, of course, the child who wanted him dead.

The hike took them close enough to the coast to smell the salt air and then, within good time, to see the Baltic sea where it nestled up tightly against the port city. Tolys subconsciously added a few steps distance between himself and his companion as their walk detoured into Klaipėda properly to take the ferry. He turned his head when Gilbert looked at him, but kept the small space between their elbows as they hung over the ferry railing.

"Good to get a break for your legs, hunh?" Gilbert asked him, teasing. "Ahah," Tolys cleared his throat. He was thankful for the sea breeze cooling his overheated body. "I'm trying not to enjoy it too much, we've hardly reached our destination yet..."

"Aw come on," with the shove of a shoulder, Gilbert broke the truce of distance and Tolys pressed his lips thin against a smile. "I reserved a room at the end, too, I'm just getting you outside I'm not trying to kill you."

Something in the wind grew lively to snatch the end of his sentence away. Tolys stared out over the water as the split drew near, his chest suddenly heavy with the kind of resentment he knew would never truly disappear. They disembarked and Tolys walked slowly toward the trail despite the lowness of the sun in the heavens.

"Gil, haven't we been here together before?"

"Probably."

"I think we fought here once. Or twice."

"Or half a million times, it's Curonia's Strait." His words seemed odd to Tolys for a moment, and then meaning coalesced around them, filling in the blanks. Still referring to the land as belonging to a fellow Spirit neither of them had seen in quite some time. Gilbert sighed heavily and rolled his head on his shoulders, leveling Tolys with a weary look.

"Food and bath are inclusive. They're even going to have beers. It's like four more hours, we're almost there."

Tolys waded into the cold water while Gilbert dug into the sand like an animal; his two feet planted as he used both hands to fling dirt into the bright light of the moon. Once the foxhole was to his liking, he grinned over the edge and whistled through his teeth so that Tolys would leave the sweet relief of the sea. By this point, Tolys' entire body was sore and trembling, but his calves especially so, to the point that he mostly fell into the hole and allowed Gilbert to shove him around until they were tucked into a chilly, damp groove.

This was not precisely the point where they met the very first time. That was so long ago and the world seemed impossibly different, there would be almost no way of discovering the exact sand dune the strange little ghost with no words in his mouth had built up his rudimentary hut and ate fish from Tolvydas' fire, something Gilbert claims no memory of anyway. Tolys melts into the other's side as his body finally accepts rest. The little hut, the water's edge, wind snickering through the pine needles. His hand brushes Gilbert's sand-caked arm and he plucks a dark piece of amber free from its cache. He feels more than sees the way Gilbert looks at him.

"Twenty years. You did it, man."

"You left first," Tolys sighs as the amber slips from his fingers and the hours upon hours of marching gradually disentangle him from awareness and awakesness.

Gilbert's gravelly laugh jiggles him slightly. "That's usually the case, isn't it? But looky, you went and did something with all that time since then, haven't you?"

It is an embarrassingly simple matter to let Gilbert's pride in him invade his own heart. Despite his exhaustion, he feels it tug at the corners of his lips and return the flush to his face. "So I did."

They'd made it through the worst of things. The Teutonic Order was no longer a militant body, the fatherland held no call for the representative of the heart of Berlin to bloody his hands, and Tolys stood once again on his own two feet—unfettered.



IN A WORLD WHERE NOTHING CAN LAST

WRITTEN BY: SPILTROSETEA

In hindsight, Alfred should have known that there was only one way this could go. It doesn't matter how quickly he runs out of his apartment, nor how fast he gets on the subway, and especially not how frantically he races to the hotel. Every lost second that passes by makes him antsy, and he has half a mind to bail out altogether.

Who could blame him? It isn't every day that he comes face-to-face with the only nation he ever bought, governed, and gave independence to.

"Somebody's late," Isabelo chirps.

Alfred huffs. "Only by a few minutes. And being late is something I learned from you."

A century ago, the taunt would have gotten him a blade on his throat. Fifty years ago, it would have been a coy smirk over a glass of whiskey, heated tension cutting through the smoke-filled room of Manila's fledgling congress. Today, Isabelo only rolls his eyes, playfully knocking into him as they step out of the Hilton.

"It's been a while since I've been in New York," Isabelo says. His purple eyes are bright and mischievous. "We've got some time to kill before the show. Walk me around?"

"That's the plan." Alfred grins.

When word got out that a Filipino would be making her Broadway debut — as the lead actress no less, and fresh off an award-winning performance in London — Isabelo immediately hounded Alfred to get him a ticket. When and where didn't matter: Alfred got pestered in meetings, conference breaks, and even emails. Luckily, it wasn't too difficult to pull some strings as soon as they ironed out the details with their respective embassies. Alfred doesn't recognize the musical, but he trusts Isabelo enough to go blind.

He can tell how much the other nation had been looking forward to the occasion. Alfred's simple button-down feels downright schlubby compared to Isabelo's stylish suit jacket and shined leather boots, an ensemble pulled together by a thin chain of gold around his neck. The sleek illusion might be marred by the mustard dripping down their fingers, but the joy of a warm hotdog in the spring far outweighs any fashion choice. It is in laughter that Alfred and Isabelo try to manage their little food disaster, the usual hustle and bustle passing by.

"Oh God, I remember when you dragged me to the inauguration," Isabelo says. They're by the corner of 50th and 6th, just across Radio City. "A full orchestra they had before, and now they've got a Britpop duo onstage. Makes you think."

"You're so mean."

"I'm just saying." Isabelo's voice is teasing. "I'm very, very jealous. You have a little piece of Arthur with you, even at home."

"So mean," Alfred repeats. The redness of his face can surely be blamed on the pollen. "He doesn't even know I like him yet. How the hell did you find out?"

Isabelo wags a playful finger at him. "I have my sources. And you have no clue how obvious your little crush is! Really, you should see how easily you melt when he chides you at meetings. He's the only one who can pull you out of hero mode."

"You're killing me here."

"I'm trying my best," Isabelo says cheerily. His face softens into a small, bittersweet smile. "But I am happy for you."

That isn't fair.

Alfred clears his throat. He puts on a cheesy grin as he slings an arm around the smaller nation's shoulders. "Dude, I'm happy for you too! You're looking loads better than you used to. Guess finally getting some sun is doing you good, huh?"

Purple eyes narrow at him for a moment, but Isabelo lets the subject change pass. Airily, he says, "No high quite like getting rid of the boss that locked you up for years. Toppling a dictator is fun — you should try it sometime."

"You might have heard that I'm busy toppling communism," Alfred says, amused.

"Look at us, beacons of democracy," Isabelo quips, not missing a beat. "On vastly different scales, of course, but I guess there's no beating a superpower."

There's a tinge of self-deprecation in the words that Alfred doesn't like. He wants to remind Isabelo of who he is and what he gave the world: the first constitutional republic in Asia, the first Asian president for the United Nations, the first modern nation to prove that a bloodless revolution was not only possible, but powerful enough to end tyrants. And there's the more personal, more private aspects too: the first person he invited to shows; the first person he danced with at balls; the first person who lived with him for nearly fifty years. Alfred doesn't know what weighs on him more.

He's still mulling over the best response when the hotdog vendor gives them a dirty look. Alfred drops his arm, suddenly self-conscious, and he nudges Isabelo to leave.

Walking east leads them through the rest of Rockefeller Center. Isabelo tries to talk him into shopping; Alfred reasons that they can't risk losing track of time. Alfred tries to talk him into shawarma; Isabelo reasons that they'd be better off getting a late dinner after the show. The bickering is so easy and comfortable that, if it weren't for all the modern cars and brands around them, Alfred might have traveled back in time.

It used to be his every day, once. He didn't realize how much he missed it.

Isabelo brightens as they approach St. Patrick's Cathedral. He runs past Alfred to get there first, nearly bumping into a few people exiting the 4PM mass.

"It's in Spanish," Isabelo beams at him, a mix of breathless and giddy.

"Uh." Alfred is dumbfounded. The Latino population of New York City is not a closely guarded secret. "Yeah?"

Isabelo laughs. "Nothing, I'm just remembering. I used to hate it when you forced English on me. You might've taught it in the schools, but I still had Spanish everywhere else."

"Stubborn," Alfred recalls, and Isabelo laughs again. "It kept bugging me. I thought you would've stamped out every last bit of Antonio's influence."

"You're the last person who should be saying that," Isabelo points out. Alfred shrugs. The other nation looks up at the basilica's sharp spires, his expression unreadable. "By that point, Spanish didn't feel like it was his. And I didn't like you getting all up in my business, changing my ways, acting like you were better. You could call it my own personal revolt against you and Antonio. I'd take what you had and make it mine."

"I was just trying to help," Alfred mutters.

The other nation only smiles. "*Pendejadas*."

"Isa," Alfred says. It's a dirty move and they both know it: the last time Alfred used that nickname, it was before taking the last plane out of Corregidor. "You know I mean that."

For spring, the wind is unbearably cold.

"Well," Isabelo says. He would look gentle to anyone else, but Alfred sees the steel in his sharp, purple gaze. "I'm not going to pretend that makes up for anything."

The pigeons fly off in droves as the bells toll, and Isabelo's gaze softens as he watches them soar to the sky. Alfred watches him, joyful and chatty and all things he never got to be, back when the stately, decorated men of Washington were breathing down on his neck. *At least you're not helpless and alone*, Alfred told him then, thinking of the nights he spent waiting for a British ship to dock at his ports. He was never good at comfort.

He's about to ask whether the other nation wants to pray or something, but Isabelo grabs his arm and stares up at him with a challenge. "Are you going to lead the way to our next stop, or should I?"

Alfred thinks back to a sunset of yesteryears. In their first meeting, it was Isabelo touring him around Manila. "You know the city well enough. Didn't it inspire your new capital?"

They pass by the giant Atlas statue across the street. Once upon a time, Alfred felt a deep sense of accomplishment at seeing the titan's bronze figure carry the world on his shoulders; this time, he deliberately looks away.

"Oh, you know how it goes." Isabelo's grip has loosened enough that Alfred could wrench himself free. He doesn't. "Besides, I've got bigger things in my life to worry about than a new capital: who's dating who, my work-out routine, saving up for a camera, and all that."

"You're ridiculous," Alfred says, almost admiringly. He notices that they've already stopped, and he has to stifle his laughter when he realizes where they are. "Seriously?"

Isabelo grins. "Seemed appropriate."

556 Fifth Avenue has been a lot of things over the years. When the building first opened at the turn of the century, it was an art gallery. Sometime after that, it was a chocolate candy store. The building was then abandoned for about twenty years. And now...

"My consulate in San Francisco is prettier," Isabelo says. "But the original is fine too."

If Alfred squints, he can vaguely imagine the fine stonework buried underneath the flaking, freestanding stucco. "You do realize you brought us further from the theater?"

"Eh," waves off the other nation. Alfred snorts as Isabelo lets him go, making a big gesture at the hut-like roof over the entrance doors. "It's my first time here, you know. And honestly, this was long overdue. You did me so dirty by not giving me a proper place in DC until 1941! My senators used to say, *Oh Beloy, for how rich they are, they couldn't even spare us a pot to piss in. It was horrible. And I said—*"

"*Manolo, those American mouths are always open: you only need to aim,*" Alfred finishes. There is a long-buried pride that flutters in his chest when Isabelo lets out a shocked cackle, and he can't help but preen. "See, I haven't forgotten our stories."

Isabelo gives him a look. "Ah, but you still liked me back then."

Alfred shrugs. "You were still mine, back then."

Purple eyes stare at him, and for a moment, Alfred is plunged back into cigarette smoke in the winter dawn, rumpled sheets, and the naivete of who they used to be.

"You know, I was never really sure how to explain it," Isabelo says softly. "On paper, sure, we had separated. But the others were wary when I started joining the Asian conferences. Even though you were already fighting the next war, it was like they still couldn't see who I was beyond you. They asked so many questions about what you did to me and what we were to each other, and I didn't know what to say."

Isabelo laughs to himself. "They just saw an idiot who couldn't let you go. I was so mad. We were barely talking — middle of the Red Scare, you were too busy for little old me — but my country was still so tied to yours. Back then, I could comfort myself with the thought that you liked having me around, yet when I became free..."

He shakes his head with a small, sad smile.

Alfred slowly asks, "But it's better now, right? This way, I can focus on my own thing and you can focus on yours. We don't need anybody else but ourselves."

"Is that really what you think?"

"It's what you fought for."

"And we haven't spoken this long in the decades since, señorito," Isabelo says, the pet name as dangerously acerbic as it was a century past. His eyes are bright. "Clearly, I'm just another regret to you and not a nation, so it's fine to avoid me even when your generals and businessmen keep forcing themselves into my—"

"Isa—"

"Don't you dare."

"Isabelo," Alfred says. "Please."

He offers his arm. Isabelo does not take it.

They retrace their steps in as much silence as New York allows.

Alfred wants to burst. An uncharacteristically slow pace brings them to the theater early enough that the lobby is only half-filled. Their usher, who must sense the tension, is quiet as she guides them to their box. By the time they're seated, Alfred has flipped through his playbill so much that it's already crumpled. He hears a loud peal of laughter from the orchestra rows, and he breaks.

"You know, this used to be a movie theater!" Alfred says, with forced cheer. "We went here once. Been through a lot of renovations though. I don't know if you recognize it."

"It was called The Colony," Isabelo says.

"Right." Alfred quickly realizes he is out of conversation topics. "Look, can we hit restart? We're supposed to be enjoying ourselves tonight. You've traveled a long way to get here, and I don't want this to end on a sour note."

"...You really don't know what this show is about."

"Should I?"

Isabelo's playbill has been folded into a fan, and like a classic debutante, he hides his face behind its flutter. Alfred plays along.

"Back in the 20s, this story about the misfortune of a young Japanese girl was very popular at my house. She got married to an American soldier and fell in love. But then the American leaves, and when he returns years later, he brings back a woman. He finds out that the girl gave birth while he was away, and the child complicates things for him and his new wife." Isabelo chuckles, but Alfred can't find the humor. "Eventually, the girl realizes that the man she loved had never truly seen her at all. So she gives up her son, and she gives up her life." Alfred frowns. "That's the plot of *Miss Saigon*?"

"Of the opera that inspired it," Isabelo says, putting the playbill down. "Who knows? Maybe things will turn out better for her this time."

He hopes so, but the way Isabelo's eyes darken makes Alfred doubt it. "I don't understand why you'd want to watch something like that with me," Alfred says. In the privacy of their box, the truth slips out easier. "This entire day, I've had no idea how to talk to you. We'd be fine sometimes, and then you'd say something so angry..."

"I'm not angry."

"Not even a little?" Alfred's smile is tight. "I know what I've done to you."

"You also know what Arthur has done to you, and you still want to stick your tongue down his throat," Isabelo snipes back. It successfully diffuses the tension: Alfred is startled enough to snort, and Isabelo is appeased enough to simmer down. "I like having my freedom. I wish I didn't have to give up your friendship to get it."

"We're friends!" Isabelo raises his eyebrows, and Alfred deflates. "Low-maintenance friends. I just have the whole world to take care of, you know. And your psycho boss had you confined in Malacañang anyway. It's not like we could've met."

"Now you're conveniently forgetting the entire decades before that happened, and that it's been five whole years since then!" Isabelo exclaims, more in disbelief than anything else. "I had to beg on my knees just to get this one day off with you. Don't say that we see each other at conferences — I want to spend time with Alfred F. Jones, not America."

Alfred hurts.

"I always have to be America," he says hollowly.

He watches the other nation open his mouth and then close it, at a rare loss for words. The purple gaze boring into him is more intense than usual: it burns like the sun.

When Isabelo finally speaks, his voice is gentle.

"The biggest tragedy of Madame Butterfly is that she never realizes she has an identity beyond being a wife. So when she loses her husband and is about to lose her son, she doesn't see any reason to live. But she's wrong. She still has a loyal maid and a princely suitor; she's not as alone as she thinks." Isabelo puts his hand on Alfred's, roughened by time and softened with compassion. "You're wrong too."

All these years, and Isabelo has kept his singular talent at disarming him. "I—" Alfred stumbles, blinking fast. "That's not something for you to decide. Not after everything that happened between us. For God's sake, our relationship started with betrayal, and things haven't changed much since then! You can't honestly say that you can look at me and see more than my mistakes."

"Is that all you see when you look at me?" Isabelo says.

Alfred doesn't answer. Instead, he smiles, bittersweet. "You know what kind of nation I've become since we put down my flag and raised yours. We said: today, you'll be independent, and I'll be a superpower. We thought we were growing up. But all we did was grow apart, and I don't know if we got anything good out of it."

Isabelo sighs.

"I think," Isabelo says, "you've always been this kind of nation, because that's how we met. Maybe you're right and I shouldn't even look at you. Maybe you deserve it."

Alfred hangs his head in shame, but Isabelo continues. "Though if there's anything I've learned from being caged and alone, it's that we always can't bear the cross of nationhood by ourselves. From being with Dirga, Malik, and the others, I've learned that being a nation can actually be pretty fun. And from being with you, back then, I've learned that enemies don't have to stay enemies forever."

The lights go down. The theater falls to a hush. The show is about to begin. "For what it's worth," Alfred whispers, "I do see you as a nation. And I'm sorry." Isabelo laughs. "Oh, don't be so serious, there's plenty of ways you can make it up to me. I'll see you in Manila next month — and I'm not taking no for an answer." The curtains rise.

Maybe the story is still a tragedy, but Alfred has hope that things are different this time.

CHAPTER THREE

ORIGINAL CHARACTERS

With so much of the world still left without canon designs, the OC creators are here to bridge the gap, with incredible designs and creativity.

In this chapter, we will also be celebrating the OC versions of characters that have since become canon, paying homage to the past.

In addition to this, non-nation oc's and yumeships also find their homes here.









ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR (AND HOSPITALITY)

WRITTEN BY: TOKKII

Uzbekistan sighed as she watched her two guests glaring at each other, so intensely she wouldn't be surprised if they could shoot lasers out of their eyes. She assumed she'd get used to their...dynamic after years of watching the two men bicker and argue and glare and smile threateningly at each other, but unfortunately it was just as silly as it seemed on day one. Nargiza prepared to become the mediator again as she smiled, cleared her throat and set the platter of fruit down on the table.

"I'm very pleased you two are here to visit. It's really been a long while, hasn't it?"

"Yes, azizam! But you know you can call me at any time. I'm much closer to you than that one over there." Iran laughed, clapping a hand over her back, the sheer force of it pushing her forward. Turkey grumbled at that, glancing at Iran's flashy car parked in her driveway. The metal glinted at him in a way that reminded him of the car's boastful owner.

Uzbekistan laughs, trying not to wince at the lingering feeling of Iran's hand on her back.

"Sadik, how did you get here? I find it hard to imagine you sitting alongside Vahid in his car. Neither of you would survive that."

"I took a taxi here."

"And you arrived here this morning? You must be tired." Nargiza looked at him, eyes furrowed in concern. Before Turkey could make a big show of comforting his damsel, speaking in the same flowery tone he'd write poems in as the Ottoman Empire, Iran laughed, speaking up first.

"Come now, dear! He may be weaker than I am, but he does not need to be coddled for a flight and a ride here."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It isn't."

Uzbekistan cleared her throat and adjusted her hair, trying to occupy herself among the tension. The two men eyed the platter of well-decorated and organized fruit, small forks neatly placed next to each of them to use, before glancing back at each other, watching to see who'd eat first. If it didn't irritate her, she'd have found it impressive the way they always seemed to turn everything into a tense competition—even eating fruit.

Vahid picked up his fork, shanked through the centers of a few kiwi slices, and popped them in his mouth. "How delicious!"

"You say that like she made the kiwis," Sadik broke open a pomegranate half, shaking the seeds into his hand.

"Well, it was nicely peeled and prepared by her. Which is the same thing."

She sighed and poured herself another cup of tea, frustrated with the both of them. Sadik noticed, slinking a hand over the table to intertwine his fingers in hers before pulling her hand up to his lips. Nargiza's heart stopped as she tried not to choke on her tea.

"You know, Nargiza, you and I go way back."

"Mhm." Where was he going to take this?

"Remember when you'd written to me about needing support in your campaigns against him? Those were the days! I'm not crazy busy doing Empire work anymore—"

"—Because you lost yours!"

"YOU LOST YOURS TOO!" Sadik barked back at Vahid, before looking back at Nargiza with his charming smile. "Like I was saying, I have all the time in the world for you now. And I fully intend to make the most of it. We stick together as Turkics, right?"

Nargiza laughed, charmed by his desperate flirting.

Vahid watched what he believed to be a shoddy attempt at the Turk trying to appeal to her. He popped another kiwi slice in his mouth.

"Nargiza, remember the time we met?"

Nargiza scoffed, a blush rising to her cheeks. "Oh, don't start, Vahid."

Vahid continued, his smile growing as he watched her make a fuss at the sheer memory alone. "Yes. I remember you yelling at me, sword in hand. You looked like a small dog! And so I told you to go ahead, kill me with your sword! But I knew you couldn't because it was love at first sight."

"Hmph. You should have, Nargiza." Sadik sulked.

"If she did, would I be here holding her like this?" He brought her other hand to his lips, making sure she was making eye contact with him. Nargiza squeaked as her heart raced a little quicker, frustrated with how well he knew her.

"Nargiza," Sadik latched onto her hand tighter, "You can't possibly be falling for this guy's charms, right? Not when he's practically a grandpa and I'm more your speed?"

"Sadik, he isn't that old. And I love you as well." She couldn't help but feel like a ragdoll being pulled by two little children.

"More than that Persian?"

"While you were busy with the Europeans," Vahid interrupted, "I was busy spoiling my dear Nargiza with the finest desserts and jewelry. We slept together in the same bed! Even when she was communist, I visited her in Moscow several times. I was always closer to her, both in distance and in her heart!" Vahid scooped closer to lean in and give Nargiza a kiss on her cheek, laughing as he watched her face bloom red at the gesture, and the Turk's face pale at the sight.

Sadik looked at Nargiza in shock, then placed a hand to his heart as though an invisible arrow pierced it. "You were...sleeping? With him? In the same bed?"

"Yes. What's the problem?" Nargiza bit into a slice of halva, and Sadik's stomach dropped in horror upon hearing the truth straight from her. He thought Vahid had been lying to him all these years!

"The problem is that it should be me! You're sleeping with the enemy instead!"

"Enemy? This isn't the 16th century!" Nargiza laughed, pinching his cheek, and though Sadik disagreed, he felt proud for making her laugh.

"You've come a long way, dear. You need to relax, not wind yourself up."

"Yes, Turkey! Be respectful to your host!" Vahid added.

Sadik felt like screaming. This wasn't happening to him. He went quiet, staring at the pomegranate seeds in his hand.

"Is he alright?" Nargiza looked at him with concern, waving a hand across his face.

"I think he's broken, azizam. Another victory for me!"

Nargiza looked at Vahid, who knew it was now his turn to be scolded.

"What was that you said about being respectful to your host, dear?"

Vahid cleared his throat, laughing awkwardly. "Oh my! Are those strawberries cut into fancy shapes?"

It was getting far too late as their stay stretched on, and Nargiza, being the hospitable woman she was, refused to let them leave.

"It's dark out," she insisted with a rosy flush to her cheeks. "All sorts of evil spirits and what-have-you roam around at this hour."

Sadik smiled, cupping her cheeks. He was optimistic at his chance to spend more time with her to make up for the lost century or so. "You don't have to pretend to have a reason to have me stay over for the night, canim. I'd do it regardless."

Vahid groaned. "Nargiza, are you sure about letting this one haunt the halls of your home at night?"

"Yes, Vahid, I'm very sure. And a guest is a blessing by God. I have been blessed twice!" She smiled as Sadik pinched her cheeks endearingly.

"Yeah, right! Which is why I get to sleep in your room while he sleeps in the guestroom?" Sadik begged, looking into her eyes with an expression that reminded her vaguely of a puppy. Nargiza loved them both, and hated having to choose one over the other. Which is why the only natural conclusion was...

"No. You will both sleep into the guestroom."

Vahid immediately marched to her, clutching her waist from behind, and the both of them began to argue their case, their overlapping voices wrapping around her head as she couldn't hear either of their reasons properly.

"Untrustworthy...two faced dog...should be banished to his hotel room..." Vahid seemed to insist.

"Haven't seen you in a century...gotta catch up...he's taking you away from me..." She heard Sadik say.

Nargiza had enough. She huffed, grabbing Sadık's and Vahid's hands, dragging them to her room and pushing them onto her bed.

"Oh my," Sadık purred, raising an eyebrow and inching his face closer to hers. "What's this about?"

"I am going to brush my teeth! Whatever you both decide to do in the meantime is none of my business!" Nargiza huffed and grabbed her nightclothes from the closet to change in the bathroom, following up with a gentle warning about not breaking any of her things, before shutting the door.

They both glared at each other, before Vahid broke into a smile and laid down on one side of the bed. "I will be sleeping here, next to Nargiza."

"What makes you so sure she isn't going to sleep on this side?" Sadık flopped onto the opposite end.

"Because! I have slept with her for years. I know her habits."

"You homewrecker!"

"Playing the scorned wife now, are we?"

Sadık groaned, hating what he was about to say.

"How about a temporary truce?"

"Oh?"

"The moment we leave her house, we're free to duke it out as much as we want. Until then, though, we're going to have to keep it in."

"A ceasefire! I remember when you'd offer me many a deal like this one. And how did those turn out?"

"Well, we're not at war now, are we?"

Vahid grumbled. "I suppose not. And it would be the right thing to do. She's stressed enough as is, poor girl." He approached Sadık until their faces were centimeters apart.

"But if you go back on your word, I will have your head, Turk."

Sadık stared at him, heart racing, before calming himself down with a "yeah, yeah, whatever."

Nargiza opened the door to see both her men just barely apart from each other.

"Oh my," she held a hand up to her mouth, "am I interrupting something?"

They both jumped back upon seeing her. "Of course not, Nargiza! You are the host. We were just...catching up." Vahid explained.

"...I see," she sighed in relief as she clasped her hand against her heart and climbed into bed, situating herself in the middle of the both of them so they wouldn't claw each other to death while she was sleeping. Nargiza yawned, kissing Vahid and Sadık on their cheeks and wishing them each goodnight before closing her eyes, and like clockwork, both men immediately threw an arm around her.

All was calm and tranquil in Nargiza's home. The room was chilly on account of Turkey's insistence on cranking up the air conditioning, but she wasn't cold.

How could she be, anyway, sandwiched between two men?

One of Vahid's hands was tucked under his pillow, his other arm lazily draped around Nargiza's waist. Sadık was sleeping on her other side with an arm around her as well, chest squishing up against her back. She could feel his warm puffs of breath at her neck, and looked behind her ever so slightly to see a soft smile on his face. Sometimes, they really did behave like kids to her.

"How sweet of you both to put aside your differences for just a moment in my home," Nargiza whispered.

"It's no problem, moosham," Vahid kisses Nargiza's cheek, glaring at Sadık, who smiles and does the same, kissing her other cheek.

"Anything for you, sevgilim."





UNKNOWN
REVOLUTION
1911 - PRESENT

PRINTED PAPER,
POSTAGE
STAMPS, METAL,
PLASTIC, RADIO
COMPONENTS





THANK YOU FOR
COMING ON THIS JOURNEY
WITH US.

HERE'S TO ANOTHER
20 YEARS



Draw a Circle, That's Hetalia!
July 6, 2026

